How Erdoğan returned from Tehran empty-handed

Since Russia’s attack on Ukraine, Erdoğan has cleverly played his hand. But, as he learned painfully in Tehran, his political clout has its limits.

Even if Western observers who have been irritated by the Turkish president’s behaviour for years do not want to admit it: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is currently enjoying one prestigious success after another on the international stage. At the beginning of the year, many partners still shunned Erdoğan because of his erratic behaviour. Now, heads of state and government are seeking his proximity – both politically and geographically. The first Ukrainian-Russian meeting at ministerial level after the start of the Russian attack took place in Antalya, later negotiations between the warring parties in Istanbul.

The EU, Ukraine, and Russia praise Turkey’s shuttle diplomacy and its commitment to regulating Bosphorus shipping in accordance with international law. In the context of Sweden’s and Finland’s NATO accession negotiations, Erdoğan won important concessions from the Scandinavians, and he was able to produce prestigious pictures with US President Joe Biden along the way. And most recently, under the personal mediation of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in Istanbul, Russia and Ukraine agreed on the establishment of a corridor through the Black Sea for the export of Ukrainian wheat, which is urgently needed worldwide. Guterres, like the US State Department a short time later, explicitly praised Turkey’s constructive role.

President Erdoğan is well aware of the situation and, hence, is playing his hand in international forums to get what he wants. It is no coincidence that Turkey is currently able to leave its mark on the international stage, but rather an expression of tectonic shifts in the international balance of power. Turkey has never been as important as now, since the beginning of the Russian attack on Ukraine. NATO’s traditional south-eastern flank is now more than ever its Black Sea counterweight to Russia. Moreover, Turkey
is perceived as a regional power that can preserve order and build bridges, with contacts to all relevant actors in the region. To know Turkey as a partner in the changing world order is currently more important than the problems of the past – even if these have by no means been solved. Whether it is the steadily deteriorating situation of the rule of law, restrictions on media freedom and freedom of expression, or differences on individual foreign policy issues: relativising problems and including Turkey are clearly more important than exhortations at the moment.

President Erdoğan is well aware of the situation and, hence, is playing his hand in international fora to get what he wants. Turkey’s revaluation must seem like a godsend to him to escape a seemingly unstoppable vortex. For in the face of a disastrous economic situation, he may lose power in the presidential and parliamentary elections that will take place in early summer 2023 at the latest. Therefore, he has run campaign for months now to draw the people’s attention to foreign and security policy.

**Erdoğan’s setback in Tehran**

Erdoğan’s recent successes on the international stage may mislead one to think that everything is going smoothly for the Turkish president. But he experienced a severe setback in Tehran last week, where a peculiar summit meeting was staged before the eyes of the world public. The media and international observers followed the meeting of the so-called Astana Process, which has been gathering selected parties to the conflict in Syria since 2017. For Russian President Vladimir Putin, this was the first trip to a country outside the territory of the former Soviet Union since the beginning of his attack on Ukraine. For many observers, the fact that the Russian pariah chose Iran – isolated internationally by strict sanctions – for this trip was an expression of Russia’s new, unflattering standing in the world community.

The focus on the two autocrats – Putin and the Iranian host, President Ebrahim Raisi – at first almost pushed the summit’s third participant into the background. Yet, with the mission-driven Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, not only an important ally of Ukraine had come to Tehran, but also the highest representative of the second strongest NATO member. At a time when Russia is being isolated by Western states at great expense and negotiations with Iran over its nuclear programme are on the verge of
collapse, Erdoğan produced images of global scope with the declared enemies of the West. The EU and NATO wondered with concern what Erdoğan’s foreign policy was getting at. A closer look, however, reveals familiar patterns – and rather little cause for concern.

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A sober look shows that Erdoğan pursued three goals with his visit. In typical Turkish fashion, the visit to Tehran was intended to signal the strategic ambiguity of Turkish foreign policy to Western partners. The president systematically avoids being taken in by one side or the other. Just a few weeks ago, there was great relief when Turkey gave in and abandoned its opposition to Sweden and Finland joining NATO. In NATO circles, it was said that national political responsibility had triumphed over the Turkish president’s power-political manoeuvres. The fact that the highest representative of the Turkish state is now meeting with NATO’s declared main enemies is in line with Erdoğan’s multilayered foreign policy. Beyond images that were supposed to show unity, however, it was mainly differences that came to light. The alliance clearly stands on shaky ground.

Internally, according to the second objective, the visit is part of an image campaign that has been running since the beginning of the Ukraine war, presenting Erdoğan on an equal footing with the most important world leaders. His statesmanlike photos with US President Biden during the NATO summit in Madrid already complemented Erdoğan’s images as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. The fact that Erdoğan now shows himself in a grand gesture with Raisi and Putin completes his image in the Turkish media. It not only illustrates his weight on the international stage, but also appeases the numerous NATO-critical voices among the Turkish population and those of his coalition partner, the radical nationalist MHP.

And finally, Erdoğan is emphatically pursuing a very concrete, power-political goal. For months, he has been talking about the need to carry out a large-scale military operation in northern Syria to fight the PKK-affiliated YPG militia. In addition to fighting Kurdish separatists, the result is supposed to a Turkish-controlled border strip to which a considerable number of Syrian refugees from Turkey can subsequently be
returned. Turkish units have already repeatedly flown attacks on YPG positions on Syrian soil in recent weeks, but this is not yet enough for the president. For a large-scale attack on the Kurdish areas of Syria, Erdoğan needs the approval of the Assad regime’s two protectors, Russia and Iran.

**Turkey’s hybrid foreign policy**

Here, however, he failed completely. Putin and Raisi gave Erdoğan a complete run for his money beyond a general agreement on the principle of fighting terrorist organisations. Both stressed the importance of Syria’s territorial integrity and clearly rejected any invasion plans by Turkey. Turkey, as has become painfully clear to Erdoğan, does not hold the same levers of power with Russia and Iran as it does with the EU and NATO. ‘Turkey cannot offer Iran anything that would make it change its position,’ says İlhan Uzgel, an expert on Turkish foreign policy. ‘On the contrary, Iran is already unhappy with Turkish influence in neighbouring Iraq, which Iran perceives as competition to its own hegemony.’

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An attack on the northern Iraqi town of Zaxo on 20 July with nine deaths, for which Iraq blames the Turkish military, is likely to have hardened the fronts. ‘Russia, after all, at least has an interest in Turkey continuing to play a mediating role in the Ukraine war and not taking the West’s tough sanctions course,’ Uzgel continues. ‘Turkey can negotiate with Russia. But apparently they are convinced in Moscow that they don’t have to sacrifice control over Syria in such negotiations.’

For Erdoğan, this realisation is a setback. Many observers are convinced that a military operation in the Syrian Kurdish region was to become a central part of his election campaign. By fuelling Turkish nationalism, Erdoğan would bring about a shift of opinion and guarantee his re-election, despite record inflation and rising discontent. And this is sorely needed: Almost all polling institutes currently see the opposition alliance led by the republican CHP clearly ahead.

The only success Erdoğan could achieve in Tehran was to make Putin wait 45 seconds for him in front of the cameras of the world public, independent media mocked. Experience shows, however, that one should never underestimate the Turkish president. He has quite cleverly positioned Turkey as a ‘hybrid partner country’ of NATO – it is simultaneously an ally and pursues an almost completely independent
foreign policy. This position gives Erdoğan considerable space to manoeuvre, which he will use in the coming months. Whether Syria, Cyprus, Greece, or Armenia: Turkey’s neighbours will have to watch closely what lessons Erdoğan draws from his failure in Tehran.

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