

The equilibrium of Turkey's foreign policy

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17.04.2024 TR Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said during his visit to Qatar that *“Turkey does not want third countries to bring their conflicts to the region”*. In particular, he accused Israel and its Western allies of fomenting war in the Middle East, the consequences of which would be disastrous for the entire area. Two months later, on June 25, 2024, in an interview with the Turkish TV channel *Haberturk*, Fidan touched on the topic of the West's clash with Russia in Ukraine, expressing concern about the high probability of the Ukrainian conflict turning into *World War III*. According to the Turkish Foreign Minister, Moscow may resort to the most radical measures: *“Under the leadership of Mr. Putin, statements are being made about the readiness to use nuclear weapons. This is exactly what we have been watching and warning about from the beginning. If the war continues, this risk will remain. It is possible that at the slightest spark the conflict will spread to other places”*. Another month later, on 21.07.2024, Turkish President R. Erdogan called on Greece and the Republic of Cyprus to stop *“militarization”* and refuse to take part in the US and Israeli plans to *“foment war”* in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

These and other similar statements by the Turkish leadership show Ankara's concern about what is happening around the country and in the immediate vicinity of its boundaries. Ankara is aware that Turkey not only borders on potential war zones but could become a war zone itself. The problem is that all the emerging clashes are interconnected, and if one of them explodes, there could be a “chain reaction” effect.

In fact, Turkey is in the highest risk zone since the second half of the 20th century because the points of conflict along its borders are “pulsating” not in a sporadic but a complex order, which indicates that Ankara has a high chance of being drawn into the epicenter of the global war mentioned by H. Fidan. The situation for the country is aggravated by the fact that it has itself been involved in generating conflict potential on its borders: it has occupied Northern Cyprus and militarized the Aegean Sea, invaded Syria and Iraq, expanded into the South Caucasus, provided military assistance to Ukraine, and continues to covertly support Crimean separatism. At the same time, Turkey is now actively playing on the contradictions between the global West and the global East, which has predictably provoked some tension in relations with NATO allies who are unhappy with the Turkish leadership's excessive independence, its blackmailing of allies, and its methods of ruling the country.

And even in the face of growing challenges and confusing foreign policy combinations that limit Ankara's room for maneuver in case of a major war, the Erdogan regime is trying to demonstrate equanimity and confidence in its capabilities. In response to media inquiries in connection with H. Fidan's statement about the threat of *“World War III,”* sources in the Turkish Ministry of Defense assured that the army is ready for all scenarios. On 27.06.2024, *TRT Heber* published the text of the response of unnamed high-ranking military officials from the Ministry of Defense. *“The Turkish Armed Forces is a dynamic army. An army that is active in many parts of the world. We also keep peace in many parts of the world. No*

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 05.08.2024.

one, especially our country, wants to face such a grim picture as World War III. However, I would like to emphasize that the Turkish Armed Forces are fully prepared for any scenario.”

It would be naive to expect a different reaction from the Turkish Ministry of Defense, but in fact it shows serious concern about the situation around Turkey. The point is the reduced predictability of the mentioned scenarios, which can be diametrically different not only due to external circumstances, but also due to the decisions of the country's political leadership itself. The behavior of Mr. Erdogan cannot but give the Turkish military cause for concern. His statements are dissonant with the status of a NATO member country that is dependent on the West both in military and technical as well as financial and economic terms. As a recent example of such a statement, we can mention the threat to Israel expressed by the Turkish leader in Rize on 29.07.2024. And this against the background of the assurances of J. Biden and the U.S. Secretary of Defense L. Austin about Washington's readiness to provide Tel Aviv with all necessary support to protect the Jewish state. Erdogan could not have been unaware that another U.S. aircraft carrier group was rushing to support the U.S. 6th Fleet, which is based in the Eastern Mediterranean and provides cover for Israel. And yet, knowing this, the Turkish leader deliberately threatens Israel with an invasion, giving it an excuse to accuse Turkey of being part of the “*Iranian axis of evil*”. This kind of “foul play” should worry the Turkish military. Especially given the public opinion.

Recent independent polls in Turkey have shown that citizens' dissatisfaction with Erdogan is growing not only because of the financial and economic crisis in the U.S., but also because of the economic crisis in Turkey.

Under the current circumstances, army circles can assume that the low level of trust after 20 years of Erdogan's rule will force him to further radicalize the pro-Islamic rhetoric and even resort to some tangible steps to support the anti-Israeli coalition. The question is how far Erdogan will go in his desire to show his independence to the West. In this case, the outbreak of “hot” conflicts along the perimeter of the Turkish borders, as warned by H. Fidan, will put Turkey in a situation of uncertainty and force it to make ad hoc and spontaneous decisions. At the same time, the Turkish public, exposed to anti-Israeli and anti-Western information, may actively push the authorities to deepen the confrontation with the pro-Israeli Western coalition, which will have disastrous consequences for Ankara.

It would be logical to assume that the political authorities face the same thing, but they are clearly demonstrating their willingness to continue a course of escalation with the West and Israel, apparently with the expectation of keeping Turkey out of the epicenter of a hypothetical major war. In this context, the regime of R. Erdogan first of all tries to get rid of the Syrian problem, about which the ARVAK Center has already [written](#).

Thus, Ankara is ready to recognize Syrian sovereignty, withdraw its regular units and disarm the illegal Syrian formations running under its aegis in exchange for Damascus dismantling the Kurdish political and administrative bodies in northern Syria and disbanding their armed units. It is clear that the Syrian direction is one of the most problematic for Ankara, as it is here, due to geographical factors, that the fiercest clash between the US-Israeli coalition and the Shiite world is expected.

Thus, Turkey is maximizing the confrontation with its anti-Israeli rhetoric to remove the issue of Ankara's involvement in the anti-Iranian axis from the agenda of its NATO allies. According to Ankara's calculations, at a certain stage of tension, its refusal to get involved in the clashes on any side (such as the U.S.-Israeli coalition or the Iranian-Shiite axis) should already be perceived by the West as a "great success" and thus dissuade Turkey from the need to openly support them. In other words, Ankara is trying to "sell" its "neutrality" in the Middle East to the West and, at the same time, to Iran and Russia.

Finally, through its anti-Israeli *démarche*, the Erdogan regime is trying to save Azerbaijan from the threat of becoming an arena of collision between the global West and Iran and the Russian Federation. The successful expansion into the South Caucasus and the establishment of influence in Baku should be considered the most important foreign policy asset that Turkey has bought during Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rule. At this stage, this asset is under a great threat, because in case of the "apocalypse" of World War III mentioned by Fidan, Azerbaijan will become an extremely vulnerable target. Ankara has every reason to believe that as a preventive measure, Iran and Russia could annex the Caspian republic to neutralize the actions of Israel and its allied coalition from the "Azerbaijani bridgehead". And, at the same time, to block the West's only available route to the continent's core along the Arctic-Indian Ocean line.

Israel's influence on Azerbaijan and Baku's role in Europe's energy security are sufficiently weighty factors to become a reason for neutralizing Azerbaijan's subjectivity by the forces of the *anti-Western front*. Ankara understands this very well, as well as the fact that in case of such a development, Turkey, according to the "Shushi Declaration" will be forced to protect its closest ally, which will automatically involve it in the great war unleashed by the Western coalition.

In this regard, there is already an opinion that at this stage Ankara and Baku are forced to give up the idea of "taking away" the so-called "*Zangezur Corridor*" from Armenia, because in case of its realization Tehran will have reasons to consider it an extremely hostile step towards it. According to retired Armenian diplomat Dzyunik Aghajanyan, Ankara and Baku are afraid that the West and Israel are trying to unleash and wage a war against Iran using only the armed forces of Turkey and Azerbaijan, for which the latter are not ready. According to Aghajanyan, "*the recent theatrics in the form of contradictions from Baku and Ankara are also meant to ease the pressure on Ankara.*"

We, on the other hand, believe that Turkey and Azerbaijan are simply trying to avoid getting involved in the lawsuits against Iran. The staging of a "*rupture*" in relations is extremely necessary for both countries to show that Turkey's intervention in the anti-Iran war on the side of Azerbaijan is far from being obvious, which in turn removes the question of Baku's direct involvement into the anti-Iran adventure. It was Ankara that initiated this orchestration, as it spread the news about its alleged dissatisfaction with Baku's recognition of the "*Uyghur problem*" as an internal affair of China and deprived Azerbaijan from Erdogan's presence at the informal summit of the Organization of Turkic States in Shushi on July 6, 2024. At the same period on July 30, 2024, for the first time in the last two years, Turkey organized a meeting of the heads of the state commissions on the normalization of

the Armenian-Turkish relations at the Margara-Alijan border section. The demonstration of contradictions is aimed at delaying and slowing down the earlier agreement of the West with Azerbaijan on the formula “Karabakh and the *Zangezur Corridor*” in exchange for participation in the anti-Iranian campaign”.

In general, Turkey will continue to maneuver and evade all attempts of the Western coalition to force it to serve its interests. In any case, without clarifying several fundamental issues, the Erdogan regime will practically keep its “neutrality” and continue to protect Azerbaijan from dangerous Israeli-American initiatives. First, Ankara will wait for the results of the elections in the US and Georgia, as well as the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the Lebanese-Israeli confrontation by the end of this year. If pro-Western forces come to power in Tbilisi as a result of Washington's and Brussels' efforts, this will, on the one hand, somewhat reduce Moscow's chances of a narrow victory in Ukraine and, on the other hand, make Baku more accommodating and confident in providing its territory for strikes against the IRI. And if Israel succeeds in undermining Iran's proxy groups in Lebanon and Syria, it will destroy the decades-old “*Shiite arc*” and limit Tehran's ability to effectively resist to the pressure of the shrinking ring of enemies surrounding it.

Finally, if the new president elected in the United States will confidently pursue a course of further escalation against the Islamic Republic of Iran, Russia and China, the role and cost of Turkey's joining these plans will inevitably increase. Under such a favorable coincidence for Ankara, the latter will have no reason to abandon its "historic choice" in favor of the global program of the Western camp.

Thus, the current situation is basically like the events of the Second World War, when Ankara made it a condition for Germany to join the anti-Soviet axis that the Wehrmacht's operation to seize the Povolzhye region would have a favorable outcome. Then, Turkey, for several reasons, did not want to be in the spearhead of an attack against the USSR, but did not refuse to take part in the dismemberment of the defeated Soviet country. Something similar is observed now, when Turkey does not have sufficient reasons to believe in the success of Israel and its Western allies in the fight against the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran, but will not refuse to consider the options of its participation in the emerging campaign under the most favorable coincidence of circumstances for itself and its ally Azerbaijan, which implies the first major failures of Moscow and Tehran.

The successful experience of President Ismet İnönü's balancing policy before and during World War II is being used by Erdogan now, when the equation with the unknown outcome of “*World War III*” is far from being solved. In the meantime, Ankara's main task is to neutralize the threat of spontaneous involvement through potential flashpoints around Turkey that it has helped to create or escalate in recent decades.