Is Erdogan Trying to Revise his Foreign Policy?

Turkey has lately shown signs of a clearly growing socio-political crisis in the country. Its economy is going through a difficult, if not disastrous, phase: the lira is plummeting, foreign exchange reserves are shrinking, external debt and unemployment are skyrocketing. Against this background, the approval rate for Recep Tayyip Erdogan as head of state has fallen below 39%, according to a Metropoll survey, raising more questions about the sustainability of the current political regime.

It is therefore not surprising that, in the short time remaining before the presidential and parliamentary elections in June 2023, Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan is actively seeking to present the country with convincing evidence that he can stabilize an economy that has experienced its worst times in two decades of rule, as well as the social and political situation in the country. However, apart from public declarations that the benefits of the current government’s economic policy will be seen in the coming summer, when there should be a reduction in the price of food and basic necessities, Erdogan has nothing concrete to offer Turks so far.

Against this background, the Turkish leader is placing even greater emphasis on using foreign policy activism to support his declining rating. A certain impetus for this was the failure of Erdogan’s idea of a military-bloc initiative, the Army of Turan, in the events in Kazakhstan, when it was not Ankara but the CSTO that was invited to resolve the situation in that country.

And so, through the national media, Erdogan has in recent days launched an active promotion of his steps to revise Turkey’s foreign policy and begin a new era based on peace, stability and diplomatic security with the countries of the region, as the Turkish Sabah wrote in particular on January 25. President Erdogan’s meetings with his advisers and aides, the publication stresses, included a comprehensive discussion of foreign policy issues and a decision to completely review and launch a “new phase”, forming working groups to develop relations with the US, Israel,
Armenia, the Arab Gulf States and the Balkan region.

In this regard, the Turkish media have actively promoted Ankara’s steps to re-establish ties with Tel Aviv, the countries’ readiness to open embassies, and even the names of the ambassadors have already been decided. In addition, Erdogan has said that Israeli President Herzog may visit Turkey soon, and the Turkish foreign minister has already held his first telephone conversation with his Israeli counterpart since 2008. Erdogan also noted that the possibility of transporting Israeli natural gas to Europe via Turkey could be considered. As noted by the Israeli media, the above statements by Erdogan have had a major impact on the Israeli public and international news agencies.

Regarding the development of relations with the Arab Gulf states, Ankara already has close ties with Qatar and Kuwait, and has begun a new process of developing relations with the UAE. Improving ties with Saudi Arabia is also among the goals Erdogan’s government is seeking to achieve in its new foreign policy and, in this regard, the president has indicated his intention to visit the UAE and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in mid-February.

Local media also promote Ankara’s efforts to ensure that loyalist groups win the upcoming elections in Libya, with references to ongoing negotiations with individual Libyan tribes.

The Turks’ attention is drawn to Erdogan’s ongoing steps to normalize relations with Armenia: special envoys have already been appointed and reciprocal flights have begun, and there are plans to turn the Turkish province of Van into a tourist zone for Armenians.

President Erdogan made his first foreign visit of the year, Hürriyet reported, visiting Albania accompanied by a number of Turkish ministers, including Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, National Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, among others. The Turkish leader met with the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and discussed not only relations between the two countries, but also the development and problems of the Balkan region.

In January, Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić at the presidential palace in Ankara, where they discussed stages of bilateral cooperation, economic issues and the resolution of the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In particular, Erdogan suggested, regardless of some details of the Dayton Agreement, that the three leaders — Bosnian, Croat and Serb — should meet together, either in Belgrade or Istanbul, after the elections.

However, it should be particularly noted that Erdogan has recently emphasized in his foreign policy activities the offer of Turkish mediation in resolving not only the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also a number of other crisis issues. Demonstrating a desire to be a world power, but lacking the resources to do so, Ankara has increasingly put forward initiatives to fit in with the global agenda and try to squeeze certain advantages for itself through dialogue, especially by focusing on various trade and transport projects. At the same time, while being interested in strengthening economic cooperation with Russia, with which Turkey has close contacts and a large trade turnover, Ankara very often demonstrates its commitment to the Anglo-Saxons and undermines Moscow’s efforts, especially in the post-Soviet space. In particular, this manifests itself in attempts to mediate between Moscow and Kyiv, while blatantly building privileged economic and politico-military ties with Ukraine, also profiting by extracting old technologies left in that country and delivering its own new military technologies, such as the Bayraktar strike drones, to test in combat there.

Thus, while adhering to a hard line towards Russia on the Ukrainian issue, Ankara has in recent days been active in its initiative to become a platform for settling differences between Moscow and Kyiv and even suggests that Putin and Zelensky meet personally in Turkey to discuss and settle the differences. Meanwhile, as part of the world’s unfolding conflict over global security, Turkey is increasingly demonstrating its commitment to the West by pumping combat drones into Ukraine. For its part, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) confirms that the Ukrainian military used a Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicle supplied by Ankara in Donbass for the first time on October 26, which already calls into question Ankara’s competence to mediate the Ukrainian crisis.

In addition, the Turkish president, while stating his commitment to a peaceful solution in the Caucasus, announced Ankara’s plans to hold another regional meeting in Turkey within the framework of the “3+3” platform. As known, the first meeting of the consultative regional “3+3” platform, co-chaired by the deputy foreign ministers of Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey and the Iranian foreign ministry director general, took place in early December in Moscow. The Georgian Foreign Ministry had earlier confirmed that Tbilisi was refusing to participate in the “3+3” regional consultative mechanism on the Transcaucasia.
Thus, President Erdogan, as the “ Atatürk of the twenty-first century”, is trying to generate ambitious foreign policy initiatives, in the hope that they will secure his position as a leader with his sights set on building a new “Turkish splendid century”.

However, he forgets that not only the Turks, but also the outside world, are closely monitoring the situation in Turkey itself. And without real progress in domestic affairs, Erdogan will not be able to secure recognition on the global stage as a leader capable of resolving others’ problems and conflicts while getting bogged down in his own.

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