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Türkiye's Foreign Policy Towards Selected Member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council: An Element of the Asia Anew Initiative?

Abstract: The aim of the article is to examine the causes and consequences of changes in Türkiye's foreign policy towards the most influential member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The main research hypothesis assumes that the change in Türkiye's policy towards the GCC after 2021 is probably of a pragmatic nature and is intended to obtain financial resources. As such, it constitutes only an element of Türkiye's Asia Anew Initiative, namely the new approach in relations with various Asian partners. At the same time, it is not an element of Türkiye's political, long-term strategy towards the Middle East region. The work includes the author's definition of a pragmatic approach to the state's foreign policy.

Key words: Türkiye, Turkey, pragmatism, foreign policy, Gulf Cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar

Introduction

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, Turkish foreign policy has undergone significant changes. In the first period of AKP rule, the concept of strategic depth by Ahmet Davutoğlu had the greatest influence on the directions of this policy (Davutoğlu, 2012). The then minister of foreign affairs and later prime minister assumed eliminating problems and resolving disputes with all neighboring countries, as well as maintaining the best possible political and economic relations with partners in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Türkiye was to become a regional power in the Middle East. However, the beginning of rapid socio-political changes in Arab countries after 2010, often referred to as the Arab Spring, negatively verified the assumptions of Turkish regional policy. Moreover, Türkiye suddenly found itself in conflict with other key players in the region, and the main theaters of its competition with them became the war in Syria, the war in Libya, the emergence of the so-called Islamic State, as well as internal divisions within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

When Qatar entered into open conflict with the other GCC member states in 2017, Türkiye supported it both diplomatically and militarily. At the same time, it found itself on a collision course with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Throughout Qatar's isolation until the beginning of 2022, Ankara provided broad support to this country, but at the same time it could not count on support from other Arab states in the Persian Gulf region. The situation was further complicated by serious incidents, such as the murder of a Saudi dissident and journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 (Treisman, 2023). Only the normalization of Qatar's relations with

the other members of this international organization allowed for the reduction of tension in the Persian Gulf region, and at the same time increased the room for maneuver of the Turkish authorities. Ankara quickly launched a diplomatic offensive to improve relations with the GCC countries. This action also had an additional, very measurable goal – to obtain significant financial resources to stabilize public finances and fight inflation in Türkiye.

The aim of the article is to examine the causes and consequences of changes in Türkiye's foreign policy towards the most influential member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The main research hypothesis assumes that the change in Türkiye's policy towards the GCC is probably of a pragmatic nature and is intended only to obtain financial resources. As such, it does not constitute an element of Türkiye's new strategy towards the Middle East region. The work includes the author's definition of a pragmatic approach to the state's foreign policy.

Theoretical background

In the case of this article, an important distinction should be made between pragmatism as an approach within the theory of international relations (Cochran, 2012; Creswell, 2009, pp. 10–12) and pragmatism understood as a specific approach of the authorities of a given country to formulating and achieving goals within the framework of its foreign policy.

For the purposes of this article, I propose my own definition of a pragmatic approach within the state's foreign policy, which is characterized by (1) giving priority to the implementation of short-term goals; (2) focus on economic goals at the expense of political goals; (3) deliberate omission of long-term and controversial political goals; (4) a wide selection of partners for cooperation thanks to the temporary abandonment of ideological goals or references to the difficult historical past. Short-term goals include very specific and measurable goals that can be achieved in a short period of time, i.e. up to three years. Giving up political goals for economic goals results from the assumption that economic matters are less controversial and generally involve measurable benefits for both parties. In turn, giving up important political issues results from the assumption that achieving political goals is impossible in a given period, while negotiating them or trying to impose a solution are less profitable than temporary self-renunciation and focusing on the benefits of economic cooperation. All the above assumptions also allow for maintaining economic cooperation with many countries regardless of the dominant religion, political system or geopolitical location.

Pragmatism in the development of bilateral or multilateral relations is certainly associated with the need to periodically give up certain priorities as part of our foreign policy in such a way that it is possible to maximize potential profits from cooperation in the short term. The Asia Anew Initiative, discussed later in this article, fits into this pragmatic approach to Türkiye's foreign policy, because it assumes conscious resignation, at least temporarily, from political competition to ensure the possibility of unhindered development of economic cooperation. Türkiye, at least at the declarative level, has giv-

en up its will to promote the Turkish socio-political model and solve the main regional problems in accordance with Turkish interests. In relation to Asian countries, it follows a very pragmatic approach, focused on achieving maximum economic benefits in the shortest possible time frame. However, questions arise whether it also applies to the most important GCC member states.

Türkiye's relations with the GCC member states in the aftermath of the Arab Spring

When the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) came to power in 2002, it introduced a multidimensional foreign policy that was intended to significantly improve Türkiye's position not only in the region, but also in the world. The new approach in foreign policy was holistic and included a few historical and geographical aspects. The main goal was economic advancement and increasing Türkiye's prestige in the region. The state was to achieve the status of one of the ten world's largest economies by 2023, i.e. the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye. The Middle East, in general, and the Levant and Gulf regions, in particular, occupied a critical status in Türkiye's ambitious vision (Bakir, 2023, p. 812). In this context, Defne Günay pointed to the roles that Türkiye played in the Middle East before the Arab Spring, that is, before 2011. She distinguished the following roles:

- Türkiye as a regional collaborator;
- Türkiye as a mediator;
- Türkiye as an EU candidate (Günay, 2017).

The rapid development of events in the region during the so-called Arab Spring forced the Turkish authorities to quickly verify the adopted assumptions, define new foreign policy goals, change the selection of measures used, as well as review the benefits and threats arising from alliances with selected countries in the Middle East. The concept of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, did not withstand the confrontation with difficult realities and the growing involvement of external powers in the affairs of the region.

In the opinion of Graham E. Fuller, “at the heart of Davutoğlu's zero problems policy lies the conviction that a series of regional conflicts, confrontations and wars have been deeply destabilizing, damaging and dangerous to nearly all states of the region, with devastating human and social consequences rarely acknowledged in the West. [...] Türkiye's new policies directly countered the American approach; zero problems meant that Türkiye would seek to negotiate issues in direct dialog with these parties and incorporate them into the solution rather than work with Washington in support of pressure, boycotts, sanctions, threats, and military force” (Fuller, 2014, p. 135). This approach to regional affairs could not be denied rationality. However, the biggest drawback of the above-mentioned concept was the assumption that Türkiye's partners would make a similar self-limitation and consciously give up various controversial issues in order to benefit in the short term.

Other researchers pointed out another disadvantage of this concept, namely the idealistic approach to international relations and the belief in the attractiveness of the Turkish

socio-political model, which was to find followers in other Muslim countries. According to Özlem Tür, the AKP sent the message, “both domestically and to the international community, that its actions were taken from a morally superior position, as when it was talking to alienated and isolated groups, trying to include them in diplomatic processes or sending the right messages to these disaffected parties when no other actor would communicate with them” (Tür, 2013, p. 137). This policy pursued by Türkiye after 2010 has become particularly problematic in its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The rapprochement between the Turkish government and the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood or the Palestinian Hamas raised concerns in both countries.

The Turkish foreign minister’s belief in the validity of the concept of strategic depth and its application in the Middle East region can be proven by his statements in an interview conducted just half a year before the beginning of the Arab Spring. In April 2010, Ahmet Davutoğlu stated, among other things: “There are rising powers in the world, and if the countries of the region are not cooperating in a way that will bring prosperity, it is inevitable that the region will become the scene of struggle between [these] rising powers. The region belongs to us. This is our home. We should decide on how to organize it, and no one should impose their view on others. Nor should we lay the blame on others, their colonialism, and their imperialism” (Davutoğlu, 2010). However, these idealistic assumptions did not withstand confrontation with reality. The process of rapid socio-political changes in the Arab countries was intended to clearly demonstrate the region’s susceptibility to the influence of external powers, as well as highlight all internal dividing lines.

The events of the so-called Arab Spring presented the Turkish authorities with difficult choices, which they had previously tried to avoid, in accordance with the basic assumptions of Davutoğlu’s concept. Meanwhile, the new realities in the region have shown that Turkish interests may be irreconcilable with the interests of other key countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. The most difficult situation occurred in war-torn neighboring Syria. Türkiye supported only some opposition organizations and tried to remove President Assad from power, exposing itself to Iran by such an action, but also getting in the way of the Saudis, who, like the Turks, wanted to take advantage of the weakness of the Syrian regime and lead to the takeover of power by groups friendly to Riyadh, and at the same time hostile towards Assad and Iran.

The events of the so-called Arab Spring highlighted all the weaknesses of Davutoğlu’s concept, especially the too idealistic assumptions, including the conviction that other countries will also strive to maintain the best possible relations with Türkiye and make similar self-renunciation in relation to various disputes. In the opinion of Oğuzhan Göksel, “the Arab Spring has revealed the clash of pragmatism and idealism in Turkish policy-making and pressured by these two opposing influences, Türkiye’s relations with Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Iran and Libya has followed a fluctuating pattern” (Göksel, 2015, pp. 69–70). The price for erroneous assumptions in foreign policy was conflict with many countries in the region, as well as a decline in Türkiye’s importance and prestige in the Middle East. In turn, the position of countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia has been significantly strengthened. For nearly a decade, the Turkish authorities have been trying to respond appropriately to new regional circumstances and adopt an appropriate new strategy. Meanwhile, the problems deepened, and Türkiye also

began to be shaken by serious internal problems, such as the mass protests in 2013, the military coup d'état in 2016, the growing wave of political repression, as well as the economic and financial crisis. All the above factors forced a change in foreign policy over time, especially in terms of seeking new alliances with those countries that could provide real financial support to the Turkish authorities, but at the same time did not express any serious diplomatic expectations. They did not do it, at least openly and officially.

Under these circumstances, the wealthy Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf region seemed the best possible choice. Adopting conciliatory assumptions and changing the rhetoric to one that was friendly and open to cooperation in many areas was supposed to enable a quick improvement in bilateral relations with individual GCC member states, as well as result in a quick transfer of capital and many investments in Türkiye. The change in Ankara's approach towards countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE also corresponded to the basic assumptions of the Asia Anew strategy.

Türkiye's foreign policy towards the most influential GCC member states after 2021

The Asia Anew Initiative, adopted in 2019, plays an important role in shaping the current foreign policy. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "the Asia Anew Initiative aims at capitalizing on potential opportunities of cooperation with Asian countries, commensurate with evolving circumstances and needs. The initiative focuses on further improving Türkiye's relations with these countries through regional, sub-regional and country-specific approaches, based on common interests and objectives" (*Asia Anew Initiative*, 2023).

The "Asia Anew Initiative" prioritizes economic and trade cooperation with Asian partners. This approach to conducting foreign policy, especially in the face of serious financial and economic problems, enabled the Turkish government to resume dialogue with Saudi Arabia and the UAE at a time when these countries normalized their relations with Turkish-backed Qatar. The Persian Gulf region has thus become an arena for implementing pragmatic policies aimed at achieving short-term goals.

Saudi Arabia, like other Asian countries, occupies an important place in Asia Anew Initiative. However, the current change in Türkiye's approach towards Saudi Arabia and the UAE does not result directly from the assumptions of this initiative, but rather is a response to new opportunities that suddenly appeared after Qatar normalized relations with neighboring countries. This happened almost three years after the adoption of the Asia Anew Initiative. Yet it can be pointed out that Türkiye's current attempt to improve relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE falls within the previously mentioned general assumptions of the Asia Anew Initiative. Its subject is primarily trade relations and the economic dimension. At the same time, however, there are opinions that closer economic cooperation between Türkiye and the GCC countries is only a prelude to a situation in which Türkiye will want to exert a greater influence on security in the Persian Gulf region. In the opinion of Ali Bakir, "Türkiye's security-oriented role in the Gulf during the last decade has been largely shaped by several critical internal, regional, and international dynamics. Intra-regional dynamics, the nature of Ankara's ties with Iran and the

GCC countries, as well as the shift in Washington's global priorities all contributed to Ankara's increasing security role in the Gulf. Nevertheless, the Turkish establishment's aspiration, desire, and will to seek an elevated security role for Türkiye in the Gulf region have also been influenced by the country's internal dynamics. Türkiye's increasingly autonomous foreign policy, the rise of its indigenous defense industry, and its forward defense policy encouraged decision-makers in Ankara to aspire to a more active role in the Gulf' (Bakir, 2023, p. 824). An important issue, however, is the fact that for now Türkiye is focusing primarily on short-term economic goals, while avoiding declarations and references to its participation in ensuring security or diplomatic involvement in the Persian Gulf region.

The best proof of Turkish involvement was a series of visits by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the countries of the region in July 2023. The Turkish leader visited three key GCC countries – Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Were the talks and final arrangements only related to economic issues or were they also related to political issues?

From a diplomatic point of view, the least challenging was the visit to Qatar, with which Türkiye has had special relations for many years and with which Ankara cooperated most closely during internal tensions within the GCC in 2017–2022. On July 18, 2023, President Erdoğan visited Doha, where he met the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. The unusual gift given to the Emir by the President of Türkiye is worth noting. It was the latest Turkish car from the Togg brand (*President Erdoğan...*, 2023). Both leaders confirmed their will to continue and deepen existing cooperation within the strategic partnership concluded in 2015. During the visit, nearly a hundred documents were signed regarding cooperation in various industries and areas (*Erdoğan meets Qatari emir...*, 2023).

In the case of Qatar, due to the existing cooperation and strategic partnership, the Turkish president did not have to ignore sensitive political issues and focus only on economic aspects. In this sense, his visit to Qatar carried the least risk and was a manifestation of a continuation of the current policy, not a new opening. It also marked the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Qatar and Türkiye (*Türkiye, Qatar to enhance bilateral relations...*, 2023). Both leaders also decided to strengthen bilateral ties. This was achieved through a series of meetings with the participation of members of a large delegation of officials and entrepreneurs who accompanied the Turkish president (*Türkiye, Qatar strengthen...*, 2023).

Yet the Turkish president pinned his greatest hopes for significant contracts during his visit to the United Arab Emirates, where contracts whose total value exceeded \$50 billion were initially negotiated and prepared for signing. They were included in the Memorandum of Understanding signed by President Erdoğan and UAE leader Muhammad Bin Zayed. It is worth emphasizing that never before in history has Türkiye concluded agreements with one country for a total amount exceeding \$50 billion. According to Ibrahim Karataş, "the agreements included the UAE's commitment to provide \$8.5 billion for reconstruction projects in earthquake-hit regions in southern Türkiye, offering a \$3 billion credit to the Turkish export-import bank (EximBank) to support Turkish exports, and purchasing an undisclosed quantity of Turkish weapons, including drones and missiles" (Karataş, 2023). Therefore, it can be said that the visit to the UAE turned out to be the most fruitful for the Turkish leader and will translate into the greatest tangible

benefits in a short period of time. However, all of them have economic and investment dimensions, not political ones.

In Saudi Arabia, Erdoğan met with Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman. The Turkish leader wanted to explore the possibilities of closer political cooperation with the Saudis, but no one made any secret of the fact that the priority of the visit and all meetings were bilateral trade and financial investments. During his visit to Saudi Arabia, the Turkish president and his delegation also signed a number of contracts, including the supply of the high-altitude long-endurance (HALE) armed drone, Akıncı (Karataş, 2023).

President Erdoğan's visits to Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia had a common denominator – obtaining new investments and financial resources to stabilize public finances in Türkiye. The president himself clearly confirmed this a moment before leaving for Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE: “During our visits, our primary agenda will be joint investment and commercial activities with these countries in the upcoming period” (*Turkey's Erdogan...*, 2023).

Erdoğan's actions should be perceived as pragmatic, intended to achieve short-term benefits, rather than as an element of Türkiye's new regional strategy. The Turkish authorities will continue to try to respond to emerging tensions and conflicts in the region on an ongoing basis to maintain the status of a key and credible player in the region. Thus, as happened several times after 2010, the interests of Türkiye and the GCC countries may again prove to be divergent enough to affect their relations with Ankara.

President of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is well aware of the fact that he must first stabilize the public finance system and calm the public mood in order to later make specific demands or expectations as part of his foreign policy. He will probably try to recreate Türkiye's situation from before 2008, when rapid economic growth in this country went hand in hand with the increase in its prestige in the region, and also created opportunities to invest outside Türkiye or directly support regional state and non-state allies. The question arises whether Türkiye 's growing economic interdependence with Saudi Arabia or the UAE will translate into strengthening diplomatic ties and broader political cooperation in the region in the future.

Conclusion

The increased activity of Turkish diplomacy in the GCC countries undoubtedly has a pragmatic dimension, aimed at obtaining tangible financial and investment assistance from these countries. Although it is difficult to clearly state whether this is only an ad hoc action or whether it is part of a broader, new Turkish strategy towards the Middle East region, it certainly fits into the Asia Anew Initiative due to the priority given to deepening economic cooperation and increasing trade at the expense of greater involvement in the development of political relations.

Türkiye 's foreign policy approach towards the most influential members of the GCC meets the parameters adopted in the author's definition of a pragmatic approach to the state's foreign policy. The priority is given to the implementation of short-term goals and it focuses on economic goals at the expense of political goals. One can also notice

a deliberate omission of long-term and controversial political goals as well as a wide selection of partners for cooperation thanks to the temporary abandonment of ideological goals or references to the difficult historical past.

The exception in the case of deepening cooperation with the three countries mentioned above is Qatar, with which Türkiye has had special diplomatic relations for almost a decade. In this case, the Turkish authorities do not have to give up political goals and do not focus only on economic goals.

Last but not least, it is worth emphasizing that a strategic cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE could expose Türkiye to a deterioration of relations with Iran. This is one of the reasons why adopting a pragmatic approach and focusing on economic issues is currently the most rational choice, which leaves Türkiye relatively large room for maneuver in the region and fits perfectly into the basic assumptions of the Asia Anew Initiative. Yet it can also be assumed that when Türkiye regains a strong economic position, it will attempt to strengthen its political position in the Middle East region while limiting the influence of Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization (Konceptualizacja): Przemysław Osiewicz

Data curation (Zestawienie danych): Przemysław Osiewicz

Formal analysis (Analiza formalna): Przemysław Osiewicz

Writing – original draft (Piśmiennictwo – oryginalny projekt): Przemysław Osiewicz

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Polityka zagraniczna Turcji wobec wybranych państw członkowskich Rady Współpracy Arabskich Państw Zatoki Perskiej. Nowy element Inicjatywy Asia Anew?

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie przyczyn i konsekwencji zmian w polityce zagranicznej Turcji wobec państw członkowskich Rady Współpracy Zatoki Perskiej po 2021 roku. Główna hipoteza badawcza zakłada, że zmiana polityki Turcji wobec GCC ma prawdopodobnie charakter pragmatyczny i ma na celu pozyskanie środków finansowych. Jako taka stanowi jedynie element tureckiej Inicjatywy Asia Anew, czyli nowego podejścia w relacjach z różnymi partnerami azjatyckimi, określanego także czasem mianem zwrotu ku Azji. Jednocześnie nie jest to element politycznej, długoterminowej strategii Turcji wobec regionu Bliskiego Wschodu. W artykule przedstawiona została autorska definicja pragmatycznego podejścia do polityki zagranicznej państwa.

Słowa kluczowe: Turcja, pragmatyzm, polityka zagraniczna, Rada Współpracy Arabskich Państw Zatoki Perskiej, Arabia Saudyjska, ZEA, Katar

