

# Erdoğan's Personal Diplomacy and Turkish Foreign Policy

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**ABSTRACT** *In recent years, one of the most popular concepts in Turkish foreign policy has been public diplomacy, which refers to government activities to increase the country's image among foreign societies. While the concept is important, the problem is that a similar emphasis and attention is not given to personal diplomacy, another state practice of modern diplomacy. This article illustrates that personal diplomacy is most effective in crisis periods, when there is dominant leadership, and when the political leader is confident about his/her ability to shape policies. As all these factors exist in Turkish foreign policy today, it is not surprising to see that Ankara increasingly relies on personal diplomacy in its relations with foreign countries.*

## Introduction

In recent years, one of the most popular concepts in Turkish foreign policy has been public diplomacy. Public diplomacy refers to a government's engagement with foreign societies in ways that improve these societies' perceptions about that government's country.<sup>1</sup> Public diplomacy attempts to increase the positive image of a country within foreign societies so that these societies can constitute an effective pressure group on their own governments, thereby influencing their government to pursue positive relations with that country. Increasing a countries' attractiveness can be realized through several means, including student exchange programs, radio and television broadcasts, establishing cultural centers abroad, and cultivating relations with foreign non-state actors.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes public diplomacy efforts may include military means if their primary objective is to improve the status of a country among foreign audiences. Theodore Roosevelt's famous *Great White Fleet* demonstration in which the United States Navy showed its gigantic battleships to foreign people in a world tour between December 1907 and February 1909, or Turkey's increasing number of military bases in African countries where Ankara does

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## Personal diplomacy is unparalleled in providing a “quick fix” to international problems, as national leaders have the power to solve problems via direct communication instead of relying on intermediaries

not have any major security interests, can be considered as examples of public diplomacy through military means. Yet, public diplomacy is mainly linked with the concept of soft power, as it constitutes an inexpensive way to increase a country's image and interests, and thus its power abroad, without relying on the production and usage of expensive military weapons.<sup>3</sup>

Since the establishment of the Office of Public Diplomacy under the Turkish Prime Ministry in 2010, public diplomacy has become one of the most popular terms in Turkish academia. Several articles and books have been published on the subject,<sup>4</sup> public diplomacy courses have been added to the curriculum of several university programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and, a significant number of graduate students are in the process of writing their theses and dissertations on Turkish public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is crucial for inter-state and society relations, and growing attention to the subject is desirable in both academic and policy terms. The problem is that a similar emphasis and attention is not given to other state practices of modern diplomacy which can be useful in analyzing Turkish foreign policy today. In this regard, *personal* diplomacy is a highly understudied area in the literature on recent Turkish foreign policy, although it has been increasingly practiced by the Turkish leadership in the last few years. While public diplomacy and personal diplomacy are not mutually exclusive and can be followed at the same time, personal impressions between political leaders can play an important role in international relations under certain structural, bureaucratic, and psychological conditions. When leaders face a crisis or an ambiguous situation, for example, a phone call with a foreign leader or a face-to-face negotiation can offer more productive results than other state practices. Similarly, in countries where leaders play a significant role in shaping policies, personal relations between leaders can provide a shortcut to solving difficult problems between states. Finally, when a leader is confident about his or her decisions and does not trust the bureaucratic process, personal diplomacy can be more effective in shaping state decisions.<sup>5</sup>

All of these conditions are applicable for analyzing Turkish foreign policy today. While they will be explained in detail, it is necessary to highlight the changing foreign and domestic conditions at this point to illustrate why we should focus on personal interactions between leaders instead of public diplomacy. When Turkey started its public diplomacy initiative and opened the Office of Public Diplomacy, Ankara enjoyed stable and constructive conditions



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (R), U.S. President Donald Trump (L), and French President Emmanuel Macron (C) speak during the 2018 NATO Summit on July 11, 2018 in Brussels, Belgium.

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in its relations with other international actors. At that time, the most important concept in Turkish foreign policy was “zero problems with neighbors,” and Ankara’s main motivation was to fix frozen historical problems with Armenia, Greece, Syria, and others.<sup>6</sup> On the domestic front, the AK Party government had initiated a resolution process which aimed to bring stability to interethnic relations.<sup>7</sup> Although the European Union (EU) accession process had frozen because of disagreements over the Cyprus issue, relations remained cordial,<sup>8</sup> and Obama’s presidency brought a fresh approach in the United States’ relations with Muslim-populated countries, including Turkey.<sup>9</sup> In the Middle East, Turkey’s prestige and reputation had grown as a result of public diplomacy and soft power efforts to cultivate good relations with its neighbors, although relations with Israel started breaking down.<sup>10</sup> All in all, Turkey enjoyed a calm and stable atmosphere at home and abroad.

A lot has changed in nine years. In the Middle East the Arab Spring, first welcomed by Turkey and many other countries as a democratic wave, soon unleashed chaos and anarchy in the region which gravely affected Turkey’s neighborhood, especially Syria. Out of this disturbance, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged as a security threat to all regional countries. However, instead of establishing a collective security system, all actors egoistically tried to benefit from the anarchical situation as Iran, Saudi Arabia,<sup>11</sup> Russia, and the United States<sup>12</sup> entered into a competition for influence in the region. The PKK

and its affiliates in Syria also saw a chance to realize their plan for an independent Kurdish state and undermined the resolution process to improve Kurdish rights in Turkey. At the same time, Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" policy failed, as all parties refrained from taking serious steps, while Turkey's domestic problems after the Gezi Park and the December 17-25 incidents took priority on the government's agenda. Turkey's relations with major powers also deteriorated during this period. The Syrian refugee problem, the frozen accession process, and the European Parliament's criticisms toward Ankara over its democracy and human rights record led to an exchange of harsh rhetoric between Turkey and the EU, while relations with the United States entered a period of crisis as a result of several developments, including Washington's support for the YPG, the residence of Fetullah Gülen in the United States, and Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia.<sup>13</sup> Turkey's relations with Russia and Iran were also far from stable, moving suddenly from cooperation to crisis and vice versa.<sup>14</sup>

Can public diplomacy help us make sense of this changing atmosphere of crisis? Some answer this question affirmatively by arguing that public diplomacy can help the crisis management processes. Olsson, for example, points out that public diplomacy can serve as a "crisis communication tool" by increasing an "actor's ability to understand and identify the issue at hand," providing networks between stakeholders and facilitating communication between competing parties.<sup>15</sup> Al-Muftah similarly shows that Qatar recently employed public diplomacy as a tool of crisis management to win the hearts and minds of the Western publics when the country needed to diminish the negative effects of the blockade imposed by Arab countries.<sup>16</sup>

Yet there are some weaknesses to public diplomacy as a crisis management tool. First, public diplomacy requires time and patience to be effective. Shaping a foreign public's viewpoints about your country and then waiting for their effects on foreign governments' policies is not a short-term task. It may take months or even years for public diplomacy to meet the foreign policy objectives of a government, while crisis periods necessitate fast and effective policy actions. In times of crisis, a government should concentrate most of its resources to solve the problem at hand instead of spreading them into different policy areas, as public diplomacy often requires. Moreover, if a country has a problem with a foreign government, it may be futile to use the foreign public as an intermediate power to solve the problem, because the foreign government would have more resources to shape its own public's views on the crisis issue. By spreading its own propaganda through media outlets and/or preventing connections between the public and foreign governments – such as reducing cultural exchanges or restricting foreign broadcasts – the home government always has the ultimate information advantage in shaping public opinion within its borders.

With these reservations, this article does not undervalue the benefits of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is a necessary foreign policy tool which may help to diminish the negative effects of a crisis, and a government should employ it both in times of peace and in times of crisis. Yet, we need a complementary approach to analyze the recent practices of Turkish diplomacy. For this purpose, this paper will focus on personal diplomacy, which may be more helpful in crisis periods, and has indeed been increasingly utilized by Turkish politicians in recent years.



**A growing number of scholars point out that personal diplomacy has tremendous effects in global affairs**

Personal diplomacy refers to diplomatic efforts “when a particular national leader tries to sort out an international problem on the basis of their own personal relations with, and understanding of, other national leaders.”<sup>17</sup> Practiced for centuries, personal diplomacy has gained prominence in recent years as many leaders have come together at international conferences and summits, and technological developments have made communication between leaders easier. More importantly, however, personal diplomacy is unparalleled in providing a “quick fix” to international problems, as national leaders have the power to solve problems via direct communication instead of relying on intermediaries such as diplomats or the public.

In the rest of this paper, the main argument that personal diplomacy has been a growing practice in Turkish foreign policy in recent years will be elaborated on. This argument will be explained with reference to four factors: (1) the increasing number of foreign policy crises in Turkey’s relations with other countries as well as unstable conditions in Turkey’s neighborhood, (2) the growing practice of personal diplomacy among national leaders in world politics, (3) the transformation of Turkish politics after the introduction of the presidential system in April 2017, and (4) President Erdoğan’s personal characteristics. Following a discussion of these factors, the growing practice of personal diplomacy in Turkish foreign policy will be demonstrated with examples drawn from Turkey’s relations with major powers, namely the United States and Russia. But first, the practice of personal diplomacy in terms of its historical development and theoretical implications needs to be briefly explained.

## **Personal Diplomacy in History and Theory**

Personal diplomacy is not a new phenomenon. For centuries, the rulers of powerful nations attempted to solve their political problems by holding joint meetings, even when travelling long distances could be fatal. For example, as Goldstein points out, three out of four kings of England in the seventh and

## Today many leaders believe that establishing personal ties with foreign leaders is a shortcut to achieving foreign policy objectives

eight centuries died on their way to Rome where they intended to have meetings with other powerful leaders of the continent and the Pope. In addition to the difficulty and danger of travelling, international law did not exist before the eighteenth century, so being murdered in foreign lands during a summit with rival leaders was always a possibility in the minds of rulers. The murder of John Comyn by Robert the Bruce of Scotland is one of the most infamous examples of a leadership meeting ending with blood at a time when there was no settled rule among leaders.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it was not surprising that in the early periods, bridges or border areas, considered to be relatively safe places, were once the main areas of personal diplomacy, so that national leaders could avoid the risk of being killed.<sup>19</sup>

The first modern attempts of personal diplomacy started with a development that changed European history as well as the structure of international relations: the French Revolution. After preventing the Napoleonic threat and dampening the revolutionary mood on the continent in the 1810s, European leaders initiated a period of personal diplomacy by coming together to shape European politics and take measures against possible revolutions in the future. Establishing what would be known as the Vienna system of Europe took two years of meetings between great powers. In these meetings, prominent national leaders and ministers, such as Tsar Alexander, Prince Metternich, Lord Castlereagh, Prince de Talleyrand, and many others engaged in direct dialogue. During the rest of the nineteenth century, additional conferences were held among the European powers, and these meetings turned into “a standard diplomatic tool for reaching agreement and building confidence among parties.”<sup>20</sup>

Personal diplomacy also played a significant role in shaping world politics in the aftermath of the two destructive world wars. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 brought together almost all of the world leaders and influential personalities over the course of six months, and exchanges between David Lloyd George, Vittorio Orlando, Georges Clemenceau, and Woodrow Wilson shaped the dynamics of international relations in the following years.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the summits held among Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Second World War were crucial in creating mutual understanding between the parties for the application of war plans, and to establish the postwar international political system.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, personal diplomacy should not be understood only in terms of summits, for which there is a separate but related concept called “summit diplomacy.” Developments in transportation technology enabled state leaders to



make frequent visits to other states, and the first foreign visit leaders choose to make during their time in office generally reveals the most favorable or most prioritized issue of their government. For example, shortly after being elected as the U.S. president in 1928, Herbert Hoover took a two-month goodwill tour to Latin America in an attempt to erase the negative feelings towards the United States in the region.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Barack Obama visited Turkey and Egypt in 2009 to change the negative legacy of the Iraq War in the minds of the Muslim people.

Today, personal diplomacy is also conducted through phone calls and teleconferences, since a state leader cannot visit another country over every single issue. The hotline established between the White House and the Kremlin after the Cuban Missile Crisis was designed as a tool of personal diplomacy to facilitate communication between American and Soviet leaders so that they could prevent the risk of nuclear warfare in the future.<sup>24</sup> If a phone call is not enough to solve the issue at hand and a leader's trip is unlikely, the conflicting parties may simply come together in a neutral venue, as happened in the Camp David peace process between Israel, Egypt, and the United States during the Carter administration. With frequent exchanges of ideas between leaders, personal friendships may also emerge to improve relations and prevent the onset of possible problems. For example, when some Turkish citizens were linked to the coup attempt against Azerbaijani leader Heydar Aliyev in 1995, Aliyev's personal friendship with then Turkish President Süleyman Demirel, and the latter's warning about the forthcoming coup, prevented the emergence of a crisis between the two countries.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the importance of personal interactions in international affairs, the personal dimension has long been ignored by many political scientists. For decades, the main international relations theories have focused on impersonal elements such as the anarchical system, rational motives, domestic actors, and organizational bargaining in explaining state decisions. According to Byman and Pollack, this omission of personality in international relations is based on three motivations. First, many political scientists believe that individuals matter little in shaping international politics; instead, they argue, political leaders are more dependent on bigger forces such as the balance of power. Second, there is a belief that focusing on individuals cannot provide the kind of broadly applicable theories political scientists seek to build. Finally, rational theorists, especially realists, argue that personality is irrelevant in international affairs because no matter who leads the country, all states are in pursuit of rational objectives, with security being the most important among them.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the general neglect of individuals in theories, it is possible to argue that focusing on individuals in politics is dangerous in practical terms



Turkish President Erdoğan (2<sup>nd</sup> L) attended the groundbreaking ceremony of the Sarajevo-Belgrade Highway with Serbian President Vučić (L), Chairman Komšić (2<sup>nd</sup> R), and Members Džaferović and Dodik of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidential Council.

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as well. There are those who argue that diplomacy should be carried out by professional diplomats instead of leaders whose limited expertise and ideological preferences may be detrimental to foreign policy interests. According to these critics, with the application of personal diplomacy, the ambitions and interests of individuals could overwhelm the rational interests of the country. For example, when Ankara sought to increase its role in world politics in 2010, retired Turkish ambassadors criticized the AK Party government for being too ambitious in seeking to be a “global power” and giving religion an increasing role in Turkish foreign policy. They argued that miscalculations and ideological fixations can be prevented by the professionalism of the diplomats, if the latter are given a prominent role in foreign policy making.<sup>27</sup> In addition, opponents of personal diplomacy warn that frequent meetings between leaders may lead to misunderstandings and confusion among the public, whose expectations may be roused by the personal friendship of leaders. As Harold Nicolson points out, during these visits state leaders may refrain from offending their hosts and avoid serious questions while their physical and mental weariness may negatively affect their judgment.<sup>28</sup> Finally, one may talk about the “Chamberlain” and “Yalta curses” on personal politics, as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement in his meetings with Adolf Hitler in September 1938, and American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s concessions to Josef Stalin during the Yalta Conference led to disastrous results in terms of international security. Thus, opponents of personal diplomacy point out the danger and naivety of believing what other leaders



## **As major leaders of world politics resort more and more to personal diplomacy, it is understandable that the Turkish leadership would also use it to achieve foreign policy objectives**

say in personal meetings. The solution again, they urge, is to rely on regular diplomatic channels instead of making important decisions during personal visits and meetings between leaders.

Despite these criticisms, the growing practice of meetings between leaders has prompted both a theoretical and practical defense of personal diplomacy. Theoretically, some scholars argue that individuals have tremendous effects on state decisions that shape historical events. For example, revisionist approaches to the beginning of the Cold War point out that if Roosevelt had not died in April 1945, and had instead lived a few more years after World War II, the understanding between him and Soviet leader Josef Stalin would have prevented the beginning of the Cold War. According to this view, it was not the fault of personal diplomacy in Yalta, but rather the leadership change in the United States that was responsible for the security dilemma that arose between the two countries.<sup>29</sup> Others argue that individuals can even affect even higher forces in international relations, such as changing the structure of the balance of power. For example, while Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian chancellor during the 1870s and 1880s, followed benign policies in favor of the status quo and made other European powers call for German leadership, balance of power policies against Germany emerged in Europe after Kaiser Wilhelm II sought to become a hegemon with expansionist policies. These cases suggest that it is political leaders “who build the alliances, and create the threats, that maintain or destroy balances of power.”<sup>30</sup> Individuals, the argument goes, are not mere witnesses of international politics, but its shapers.

If political leaders are that important, then it may be misleading to ignore their interactions when analyzing international relations. Recently, indeed, a growing number of scholars point out that personal diplomacy has tremendous effects in global affairs. Hall and Yarhi-Milo, for example, argue that when making decisions political leaders significantly rely on their personal impressions of other leaders, as personal diplomacy provides “sincerity judgments,” which are essential in shaping choices in international relations. These personal impressions could be gained during meetings through “facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, even unconscious movements, or reactions,” and during the process of interaction, political leaders continuously update their judgments about the sincerity and trustworthiness of other leaders.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Holmes argues that personal diplomacy is crucial in international affairs as it provides “a *sui generis* form of communication.” He points out that face-to-face interactions between political leaders help them to understand the intentions of other actors, which is crucial for evading the problem of the security dilemma in international politics. Bringing neuroscience into his explanation, Holmes introduces the idea that the mirroring system in the brain enables leaders “to directly access the intentions of others with a higher degree of certainty than [rational] models of bargaining predict” as the actor automatically simulates the thoughts and intentions of the others as if he/she were in their position.<sup>32</sup> While these arguments do not necessarily imply that personal diplomacy would lead to mutual understanding between international actors, they do give credence to the idea that face-to-face interaction between leaders plays a significant role in shaping states’ decisions and actions.

The practice of personal diplomacy is also defended in practical terms. Its proponents emphasize that when diplomacy is conducted by the most important person, which is the state leader, it is more likely to bring success.

Former U.S. President Ronald Reagan emphasized that if he met with a Soviet leader, they could “accomplish things our countries’ diplomats couldn’t do because they didn’t have the authority,” and that if there was an understanding between leaders, the bureaucrats could not “louse up the agreement.”<sup>33</sup> Personal diplomacy may also be critical in breaking the existing taboos in state institutions, which are dependent on traditional mindsets. Because of their ongoing education and socialization processes, state institutions such as the Foreign Ministry or the military may have their own, inflexible ideologies, which yield continuity in foreign policy in spite of leadership changes. In such instances, a strong and charismatic leader may approach the existing issues from a different perspective and introduce policy changes. An example of this is when, in the 1960s, John F. Kennedy improved American relations with some nationalist leaders of third-world countries who were regarded as Communist in the traditional mindset.<sup>34</sup> Finally, as mentioned above, personal diplomacy can provide a quick fix to international problems, as leaders would not lose precious time, especially during a crisis, with bureaucratic processes.

## **The Factors behind Personal Diplomacy in Turkish Foreign Policy**

In the current state of international relations, state leaders rely more on personal diplomacy than other methods in pursuing their foreign policy objectives, and Turkish leaders also increasingly conduct their diplomacy through personal relationships with other foreign policy leaders. From the military coup in 1960 to the AK Party’s coming to power in 2002, Turkey had followed

a strict institutional approach in its relations with foreign countries, as two strong institutions, the military and the Foreign Ministry, had substantial influence on foreign policy making. Except for a brief period under Turgut Özal's presidency (1989-1993), Turkish politicians could not break the hierarchical nature of the policymaking process, so their ability to conduct personal diplomacy was quite limited. This

## **Turkey's problems with other countries and the regional disorder in the Middle East and the Black Sea have pushed Turkish officials to adopt personal diplomacy in order to bring about urgently needed solutions**

hierarchy ended when the power of the military in Turkish politics eroded as a result of the political reforms brought about by the EU accession process, as well as the emergence of strong public support for Erdoğan's government. Not only did the new political structure enable Turkish leaders to play a more effective role in shaping Turkey's foreign policy objectives and interests, it also provided opportunities for more serious exchanges with foreign leaders who had previously seen the military and civilian bureaucracy as the real decision makers in Turkey.<sup>35</sup> As a result, personal relationships between leaders became critical in shaping bilateral relations. This was first observed in the friendship between Erdoğan and Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad that began in 2003 and lasted until the civil war began. Their successive meetings broke the ice between the two countries and led to increasing economic, political, and military ties until Assad's violent repression of the Syrian opposition in 2011.<sup>36</sup>

Although his personal diplomacy with Assad ended in failure, in recent years Erdoğan has continued to conduct personal diplomacy in relations with several political leaders. This approach can be explained through four factors: the growing practice of personal diplomacy in world politics, the increasing number of foreign policy crises in Turkey's relations with other countries as well as unstable conditions in Turkey's neighborhood, the transformation of Turkish politics after the introduction of the presidential system, and Erdoğan's personal characteristics.

Starting with the most general factor, today many leaders believe that establishing personal ties with foreign leaders is a shortcut to achieving foreign policy objectives. Vladimir Putin, for example, is known for his preference for having close friendships with several former and current foreign leaders, including: Gerhard Schröder, Silvio Berlusconi, Nicholas Maduro, Hassan Rouhani, and Bashar al-Assad. Although Putin's "macho authoritarian style of leadership" did not gain him the admiration of such leaders as Barack Obama and Angela Merkel,<sup>37</sup> American intelligence officers argued that Putin, as a former KGB agent, knows how to "identify and exploit vulnerabilities in an individual," and

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use these skills to achieve foreign policy objectives.<sup>38</sup> Chinese premier Xi Jinping also uses personal diplomacy effectively in dealing with major powers in Asia. When China and India had border problems, and some disagreements emerged over China's Belt and Road initiative, Xi organized summit meetings with

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to overcome potential problems.<sup>39</sup> Despite regional competition between Russia and China, Xi also developed close personal ties with Putin, as clearly demonstrated with the "Friendship Medal" accorded to the Russian President by Xi in June 2018.<sup>40</sup>

Personal diplomacy is quite popular in Western democracies as well. Donald Trump is an instructive example. As mentioned above, several American presidents in the past effectively used personal relationships to realize foreign policy objectives. Nevertheless, Trump has pursued personal diplomacy in an unprecedented way. As a former businessman, he approaches foreign policy as a bargaining art and believes that he can easily convince other leaders once he talks to them. When asked about how he would deal with the problems between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds during the pre-election process in 2016, Trump stated that he could get them together to solve the problem, in an oversimplification of the zero-sum game relationship between both parties.<sup>41</sup> The U.S. president also believed that he could solve the main security problems of the United States by simply negotiating. For example, he held summit meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to negotiate a nuclear agreement with that country. Trump indeed enjoys talking about his personal relationships with foreign leaders, including Putin, Xi, and Erdoğan,<sup>42</sup> and believes that he is a good bargainer despite the criticism that he is often fooled and that he falls under the influence of whoever talks to him last.<sup>43</sup>

As major leaders of world politics resort more and more to personal diplomacy, it is understandable that the Turkish leadership would also use it to achieve foreign policy objectives. Nevertheless, there are more specific reasons for Turkey to adopt personal diplomacy. As mentioned in the introductory section, the Middle East has been a boiling hotspot since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in February 2011 (and perhaps even earlier), and the past eight years have failed to bring a permanent solution to the crisis. At the zenith of the conflict, the ISIS threat terrorized the entire region, while the YPG's growing ambition for an independent Kurdish state became an imminent danger to Turkish national interests. In addition to these problems, the flood of refugees from Syria to Europe and their influx to some countries in the region, especially Turkey, has destabilized Middle Eastern politics. Disorder also hit the Black Sea region



as the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 became one of the most serious issues of contention between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War. Recently, the Russian arrest of Ukrainian sailors on the Kerch Strait increased this tension, as the United States sent its destroyer USS Donald Cook to the Black Sea in support of Ukraine. NATO's growing presence and military activities in the region has begun to concern the Russian leadership, and the risk of military confrontation has increased.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to these regional problems, Turkey has had specific problems with several countries in recent years. Ankara's relationship with the United States entered into a catastrophic period beginning in the final years of the Obama administration due to several developments, including the presence of Fetullah Gülen in the United States, the trial of Pastor Andrew Brunson in Turkey, American support for the YPG in Syria, Turkey's purchase of S-400 missile systems from Russia, Trump's pro-Israeli policies, American protectionist (and politically-motivated) economic measures which have caused the Turkish lira to depreciate, and many others.<sup>45</sup> Not so long ago, Turkey's relations with Russia and Iran were also problematic. Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet in November 2015 froze bilateral relations until the following summer,<sup>46</sup> while Iran's sectarian policies in Syria increased the possibility of military escalation with Turkey toward the end of 2016, when an allegedly Iranian-made drone killed four Turkish soldiers in northern Syria.<sup>47</sup> During this period, relations with the EU remained tense over the frozen accession process, the refugee crisis, and growing democracy and human rights criticisms of Turkey from European capitals following Turkey's declaration of a state of emergency in the wake of the coup attempt in 2016. Additionally, the recurring Aegean dispute with Greece, and Cyprus' oil drilling activities in the Mediterranean Sea led to new accusations of provocation and exchanges of threats.<sup>48</sup> All in all, Turkey's problems with other countries and the regional disorder in the Middle East and the Black Sea have pushed Turkish officials to adopt personal diplomacy in order to bring about urgently needed solutions.

At the domestic level, Turkey's decision to change its constitution and adopt a presidential system in April 2017 is equally important in explaining the rise of personal diplomacy in Turkish foreign policy. The concept of personal diplomacy posits that leadership interaction is most efficient when more power is concentrated in the hands of an individual leader; it does not produce any serious effect if the leader is regarded as weak or state power is shared by different institutions.<sup>49</sup> One of the main criticisms against the parliamentary system in Turkey was that bureaucratic obstructions and partisan controversies in the parliament slowed down the decision making process and prevented effective governance. As Aslan points out, the main advantage of the presidential system is that it expedites decision making, which is critically important during periods of crisis. The presidential system also prevents confusion

## As Turkey and Russia found common ground on Syria over time, the two leaders increased bilateral cooperation through personal diplomacy

regarding the balance of power between the president and prime minister. The existence of a single decision maker prevents the decision making process from being spread out among several individuals in the government.<sup>50</sup> As the responsibility and power are assumed by the president, he/she would be more willing to deal with the problems at hand instead of relying on bandwagoning tactics and waiting for others to take responsibility. In short, with the introduction of the presidential system, the Turkish president became the most influential official in the Turkish foreign policy decision making process, which also gives the president greater potential to solve a crisis at hand through personal relationships with other leaders.

Finally, at the individual level, it is possible to assert that President Erdoğan is more prone to conduct personal diplomacy than any other Turkish leader to date. One can argue that Erdoğan has significant trust in his ability to show strong leadership, which reflects his determination to control the domestic and foreign policies of his country. By analyzing Erdoğan's personality traits and leadership style, Görener and Ucal find that the Turkish President is quite exceptional in believing that he can "influence what happens in the political environment," and that he is more likely to take responsibility in confronting the problems at hand, whether they are domestic or international.<sup>51</sup> Although these characteristics sometimes lead to unnecessary activism in Turkish foreign policy, they argue, Erdoğan "seems to perceive his authority and convictions as being above and beyond all institutions, people, and ideas."<sup>52</sup> Similar to many political leaders who adopt personal diplomacy, Erdoğan also seems to mistrust the traditional diplomatic elite of the country, as witnessed in his frequent referral to them as *monşer* (from the French expression *mon cher*) to emphasize that the diplomatic elite, under Western influence, look down on the Turkish public as well as Erdoğan's government.<sup>53</sup> Combined with Erdoğan's belief in his personal ability, this mistrust leads to a hierarchical decision making process in Turkey which has caused foreigners to define the country as "Erdoğan's Turkey."<sup>54</sup> In sum, all of these global, regional, domestic, and personal variables help explain the growing practice of personal diplomacy in Turkish foreign policy.

### The Practice of Personal Diplomacy in Turkish Foreign Policy

A state leader can use personal diplomacy both to solve crises and extend international cooperation, which is the case in Erdoğan's personal interactions with other leaders. In fact, the personal diplomacy literature argues that per-



The leaders of Turkey, Russia and Iran gathered for the 5<sup>th</sup> summit on Syria on September 16, 2019 in Ankara, Turkey.

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sonal diplomacy is most likely to occur, and is at its most effective, during times of crisis. We can see this theoretical assertion come to life most clearly in Erdoğan's relationship with Donald Trump. Although Turkish-American relations have never been perfect, the alliance has significantly fallen apart in recent years as a result of several developments, mentioned above, which mainly started in the final years of the Obama administration. At the beginning of 2012, President Obama counted Erdoğan as one of the five leaders with whom he can build "friendships and the bonds of trust;"<sup>55</sup> yet, when he was about to leave the presidency, he considered the Turkish president as "a failure and an authoritarian."<sup>56</sup> Erdoğan was also disappointed over Ankara's relations with Washington during Obama's presidency, especially due to American support for the YPG.<sup>57</sup> Erdoğan believed that relations with the United States would be better with the new president and his preference was Donald Trump because of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's statements about arming the Syrian Kurds<sup>58</sup> as well as her alleged ties with the Gülenists in the United States.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, with the surprising election of Donald Trump, Erdoğan found a chance to make a fresh start in Turkish-American relations by establishing personal ties with the new president.

Erdoğan's personal diplomacy with Trump may be seen in the Turkish president's reluctance to directly criticize his American counterpart. As the deterioration in bilateral relations continued in the first two years of the Trump administration, Erdoğan mainly placed the blame on traditional elements of the American decision making process instead of the president. On the Syr-

ian issue, for example, the targets of Erdoğan's criticisms have generally been some American military officers who, he believed, were behind the plan to arm the YPG. After a phone conversation with Trump, Erdoğan told the press that Trump was not aware of the arms transfer to the YPG as his advisers did not inform him.<sup>60</sup> Calling these elements a form of "deep state," the Turkish president maintained that these military officers obstructed Trump's preferred policies that would alleviate Turkish concerns.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, regarding the disagreement over Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia, Turkish officials maintain that the main problem is the U.S. Congress' opposition to Turkey, not the president's. In this respect, İbrahim Kalın, Erdoğan's spokesperson, stated that if the Congress applies sanctions towards countries that buy the S-400 missile system, they expect Trump to use his presidential right to provide an exemption for Turkey.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, when Turkey started receiving parts of the missile system from Russia, Trump personally intervened on the issue and met with the Republican senators to convince them not to apply sanctions against Turkey,<sup>63</sup> and stated that he did not blame Turkey for buying missile systems from Russia.<sup>64</sup>

Erdoğan believes that if he talks to Trump one-on-one, he can convince the president to take foreign policy steps in line with Turkey's interests. This fits perfectly with the personal diplomacy literature, which claims that personal diplomacy is more likely to occur, and is more efficient, if the political leader is confident about his abilities to shape policies. This strategy has been productive for Turkey so far. For example, surprising everybody in Washington, Trump announced his decision to withdraw American troops from Syria after a phone conversation with Erdoğan in December 2018.<sup>65</sup> On the S-400 issue, similarly, it is reported that Erdoğan prevented Trump from issuing an ultimatum against Turkey by means of a phone call in February 2019, and tried to push him against possible sanctions by accusing the Congress of trying to take away the president's executive power.<sup>66</sup> One cannot predict whether or not the personal relationship between Trump and Erdoğan will halt the deterioration in Turkish-American relations, but Ankara seems likely to keep using the leadership channel more frequently in the future. Indeed, both presidents' sending their sons-in-law for meetings with their counterpart in recent months is another signal of the high level of personal diplomacy between Trump and Erdoğan.<sup>67</sup>

Another successful case of Erdoğan's personal diplomacy can be observed in Turkey's relations with Russia. This relationship, between two self-confident and domineering leaders who face little institutional and bureaucratic restriction, illustrates the effectiveness of personal diplomacy. As mentioned above, when Turkey shot down a Russian jet on the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015, Ankara and Moscow entered the most troubling period in bilateral relations since the end of the Cold War. Combined with the disagreements and



clashes of interests over Syria, the shooting episode froze political relations between the two countries while economic transactions, especially the flow of Russian tourists to Turkish coasts, almost stopped. Bilateral relations were mainly put back on track with Erdoğan's personal outreach to Russian President Vladimir Putin. After the incident, Erdoğan's phone conversations with Putin, as well as his public statements expressing Turkey's desire to fix the problem, helped to alleviate the crisis. Even after Turkish-Russian relations normalized in the summer of 2016, Erdoğan continued to use his personal channel with the Russian president. As Turkey and Russia found common ground on Syria over time, the two leaders increased bilateral cooperation through personal diplomacy. It is reported that Erdoğan and Putin met with each other thirteen times and had eight phone conversations in 2018 alone, all of which played a significant role in the coordination of regional policies and the strengthening of relations. In these meetings and conversations, Turkey and Russia came to terms on several issues, including stability in Syria, energy cooperation, and the arms trade. Whenever a problem emerged, a meeting between the two leaders helped to resolve any misunderstandings, as happened when Turkey asked Russia to shorten the delivery time of the S-400 missiles when the United States was pressuring Turkey.<sup>68</sup> All things considered, it seems that personal diplomacy between Erdoğan and Putin not only ended a disturbing crisis but also helped to extend international cooperation between Turkey and Russia.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, in January 2019, Putin attributed the improvement of bilateral relations to Erdoğan by expressing that the positive turn-around in such a short time was due to Erdoğan's personal merit and achievement, as the Turkish president had spent so much of his time on the issue.<sup>70</sup>

**Personal diplomacy is most effective in crisis periods, when there is dominant leadership, and when the political leader is confident about his/her ability to shape policies**

## Conclusion

This paper argues that personal diplomacy is a growing state practice in Turkish foreign policy, and that scholars should focus on personal diplomacy and its implications more than they have done to date. While the concept of public diplomacy continues to garner attention, a similar emphasis is not given to personal diplomacy, although the latter explains Turkish foreign policy better if one takes the current political conditions into consideration. Personal diplomacy is most effective in crisis periods, when there is dominant leadership, and when the political leader is confident about his/her ability to shape policies. These three conditions are all present in Turkey, which explains why personal diplomacy is a growing practice in Turkish foreign policy, as seen in

Turkey's relations with the United States and Russia, whose leaders also prioritize personal relations with foreign leaders.

This does not mean that we should avoid public diplomacy and stop researching it. Both at the academic and political levels, public diplomacy will and should continue to play an important role to increase Turkey's status and prestige in the eyes of foreign audiences. Nevertheless, we also need to respond to the political necessities of the current time, and this paper argues that during difficult times personal relationships between state leaders may bear fruit by bringing fast and direct solutions to existing problems. As has been shown, that is what Erdoğan has tried to accomplish in reducing problems with the United States and Russia, and so far, he has achieved some success. ■

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