

# **8+2 Myths about Turkish Foreign Policy**

## **[8+2 Μύθοι για την Τουρκική Εξωτερική Πολιτική]**

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### **Introduction**

Turkish foreign policy is the question that preoccupies, perhaps more than any other, the Greek-speaking world, in journalistic coverage, in the exercising of diplomacy, and in research and analysis. This statement by Zenonas Tziarras, in the introduction of his book, is by no means incidental, since both Greece and Cyprus face serious and longstanding geopolitical problems with Turkey. However, it is also a fact that, despite the importance of the subject, quite often analyses of Turkey's foreign policy are characterised by misinterpretations and myths entailing some basic contradictions. On the one hand, there are attempts to interpret Turkey's foreign policy that exaggerate the capabilities of the Erdoğan government. On the other hand, there are analyses that underestimate the capabilities and role of Turkey.

It is on this very contradiction that Zenonas Tziarras attempts to open a dialogue, through his book *8+2 Myths about Turkish Foreign Policy*, published in Greek by Geopol Publishing in Nicosia. As the title of the book clearly states, this publication concisely examines ten basic myths, aiming to contribute to the public debate over the major issue of Turkey's foreign policy. Most of the myths under examination appear quite frequently in public debate both in Greece and Cyprus. A few of them relate more to how Ankara itself seeks to advance aspects of its foreign policy. The author's selection of the specific ten myths was based on more traditional, as well as contemporary themes of the country's foreign policy that have appeared in international and Greek literature, and also in current affairs.

As the author himself stresses in both his introduction and conclusion, the book condenses thematic sections that could stand on their own as individual pieces of research. They concern separate questions in need of further analysis. This is where the important dimension of Zenonas Tziarras' contribution lies. This specific text was not published with the aim of analysing and comprehensively answering all questions deriving from Turkey's foreign policy and which, in one way or another, concern Greece

and Cyprus. On the contrary, the aim of the publication is to set new foundations for comprehensive discussion and further research, based both on an integrated historical framework and on a specific theoretical framework. In this way, Tziarras' text could constitute an initial attempt at the pursuit of a prospective analysis of Turkey's foreign policy, which would not be limited by the Greek or Greek Cypriot perspective, but which would take into consideration the wider realities of Turkey itself, which, to a great degree, influence the exercise of its foreign policy.

At exactly the same level, the usefulness of this publication in Greek should be noted. Its positive contribution to the prospects for a deeper and more comprehensive dialogue in relation to Turkey's foreign policy is maximised, because the use of the Greek language naturally brings closer to society some of the important issues that concern political and diplomatic activity. At the same time, the myths explored by the book display contradictions, which perhaps form one of the major topics for a comprehensive piece of research in the future.

### **Structure and Content**

Even though the author clarifies, right from the beginning of the book, that this is a concise attempt to discuss the myths accompanying Turkish foreign policy, he nevertheless ensures he sets a more general framework of analysis, which assists the theoretical deepening of the study. According to Zenonas Tziarras, Turkey seeks to become a great power in a position to negotiate on equal terms with the other great powers. It furthermore seeks to change, wherever it can, the status quo to its advantage. In the theoretical framework of *offensive realism*, the aforementioned constitute the essence of the definition of the revisionist state. Therefore, this book tries to reposition the public debate on Turkey's foreign policy, based on the hypothesis that Ankara's goal is not simply to ensure the security of the state, but much more to maximise its power and improve the position of the country in the international system. It is worth mentioning, however, that the author does not confine the debate on Turkish foreign policy myths to a one-dimensional discussion on revisionism. On the contrary, depending on the topic that arises in each section of the book, different theoretical schemes are concisely recorded, that help enrich knowledge and analysis of the policy Ankara is both internationally and regionally trying to implement.

The first myth the text explores focuses on the perception that Turkey's foreign policy never changes and has always been revisionist. As seen from the analysis, for many decades after the establishment of the modern Turkish state, the main direction of foreign policy was to preserve the status quo, with some exceptions, such as

the unsuccessful attempt to annex Mosul, and the later annexation of Alexandretta. In the same context, the author stresses that Turkey's more aggressive policy on the questions of Cyprus and the Aegean was more the result of a defensive–reactionary trend, with the countering of fabricated or real threats to the country's security in focus. On the contrary, as underlined in the book, during the AK Party period, a clearer attempt to change the status quo is recorded, through strategies of expanding Turkey's influence. Therefore, the perception that fosters the view of Turkish foreign policy as unchanging over historical time removes the possibility of assessing greater or lesser risks caused by the current phase of Erdoğan's truly revisionist policy.

The second myth is the one that construes Turkish foreign policy as chaotic and without a plan. It is precisely here that one of the most serious contradictions in relation to the first myth of unchanging historical continuity, or even the perception of a powerful Turkish state that can perfectly implement its strategy, can be found. As the author points out, using the example of Turkey's policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara proceeds with the upgrade of means, such as military power, that aim to serve long-term goals in the region; however, this policy is not implemented in a chaotic vacuum. On the contrary, it builds on previous efforts made in that direction, even if they were made in a different political and economic context or had different outcomes.

The third and fourth myth are summarised in the following contradiction: on the one hand, Turkish foreign policy is presented as fully rational, while on the other hand, Erdoğan is being portrayed as a completely irrational political leader. The author capitalises on the studies on strategic culture, through which the dialectic relation between foreign policy ideological motives and moments of realpolitik is highlighted -those circumstances, that is, which show that Ankara realises the limitations the international environment can place on its own goals.

The sequel of these contradictions is recorded by the author in the examination of the fifth and sixth myths, where Turkey is presented as a giant with feet of clay, ready to collapse, or a country which can, unhampered, dominate its region. In this context, Tziarras examines developments in the Kurdish problem as a regional issue, and reaches the conclusion that the general trends of the international system, in conjunction with regional developments, do not attest to the possibility of collapse of the Turkish state. At the same time, the author, through utilisation of the theoretical framework of hegemony and the combination of hard and soft power of states, claims

that the efforts of the Turkish state for hegemony are unsuccessful. However, these efforts should not be underestimated.

The seventh myth is the one which considers that Turkey's foreign policy changed because of rejection by the EU and is in juxtaposition with the tenth myth, which promotes the view that in the post-Erdoğan era the country will return to its pro-Western orientations. According to Tziarras, alternative pursuits, beyond the EU, existed even in the early years of Erdoğan's government. Therefore, the anti-Western orientation is not just a result of developments in Euro-Turkish relations, but has a historical depth and is influenced by wider realignments. This, according to Tziarras, is exactly the broader context in which Turkey's foreign policy in the post-Erdoğan era should be examined. Even if a more balanced and smoother relationship with the West is sought, the changes that have prevailed do not indicate that Turkey will turn into an obedient partner of the West.

Finally, the author reveals the eighth myth, which emphasises that Turkey has overextended itself, thus opening up prospects for a dramatic defeat, in conjunction with the ninth myth, which insists that the country is isolated. Tziarras explains that overexpansion is an element that characterised the age of empires and examines the aspects of Turkish expansion through the limits set by the modern international system. At the same time, he underlines that Turkey's isolation is indeed a development which was particularly strengthened after the 2016 coup attempt; however, it was not evident in very critical issues such as the Syrian problem and the confrontations in the Eastern Mediterranean. The author proves that, despite the blow to Turkey's relations with the West in recent years, issues such as the country's presence in Syria and its claims in the Eastern Mediterranean, have been treated, to say the least, with tolerance by powerful countries such as the US and Russia.

## **Conclusion**

Zenonas Tziarras' book constitutes a valuable contribution to the creation of conditions for a comprehensive, scientific dialogue on Turkish foreign policy issues. Both the size of the book (102 pages) and the author himself make clear that it is not an integrated research effort, but a beginning for more comprehensive study of Turkish foreign policy. It should, therefore, be evaluated as such. The decision to write the book in Greek also adds value to its usefulness, since its general subject matter focuses on issues that preoccupy Greek current affairs almost daily. From the content of the book, one can identify different dimensions of a future research agenda in relation to the evolution of Turkey's foreign policy that will, in fact, not be limited to is-

sues of strictly Greek or Greek Cypriot interest. This arises precisely from the fact that Turkey's foreign policy does not focus exclusively on issues such as the Cyprus problem or the dispute in the Aegean. As Tziarras' book indicates, foreign policy priorities can be very different from what public opinion in Greece and Cyprus perceives. At the same time, Ankara's motives for specific political choices can be very different.

**Nikos Moudouros**