

Failed coup takes toll on Turkey's foreign policy

Stuart Williams

Istanbul

The consequences of the failed coup in Turkey increased Ankara's international isolation, exposing shortcomings in the government's sometimes overambitious foreign policy, analysts said.

NATO member and EU hopeful Turkey had expected an outpouring of solidarity after the coup attempt one year ago aimed at ousting President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and which Ankara blames on the US-based Turkish preacher Fethullah Gulen.

Ties with Brussels, however, were bruised and Turkey's long-running EU membership bid set back as the European Union reacted with alarm to the post-coup purge that has seen tens of thousands of people arrested.

US President Donald Trump's administration has given no sign that Turkey has seen the end of the rancour that marked ties between Washington and Ankara under President Barack Obama.

■ Turkey is increasingly banking on a close relationship with Russia and has made much of a multipolar foreign policy.

Add to this the fact that the diplomatic crisis in the Gulf risks wrecking Turkey's efforts to keep a tight strategic alliance with Qatar without upsetting Saudi Arabia.

"Turkey has been somewhat isolated diplomatically since the July 2016 failed coup, both because NATO partners were taken by surprise and because the subsequent purge went far beyond anything that could be expected," said Marc Pierini, a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe.

"The crisis between Saudi Arabia and its allies and Qatar only adds to the host of problems Turkey is facing on the diplomatic front."

Ankara's precarious position is a far cry from what it enjoyed a decade ago, when Erdogan was considered an essential mediator in almost every crisis and was courted by both the European Union and the United States.

For former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey was a centre of the Islamic world and deserved influence from Bosnia to Arabia in lands Istanbul controlled under the Ottoman Empire.

Turkey had high hopes that the "Arab spring" uprisings would bring into power Sunni Muslim governments that would be under Turkish influence but the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood's Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi and failure to unseat Syria's Bashar Assad put paid to these goals.

"The picture today is a very different one," said Kemal Kirisci of the Brookings Institution, a Washington think-tank. "It is characterised by the ever-increasing disputes that Turkey is having with countries in its neighbourhood and beyond."

Turkey has sought to join the European Union and its predecessor for the last half century, in an agonisingly slow process in which Ankara watched on enviously as post-Communist states joined the bloc with far less fuss.

Erdogan has sometimes made Brussels seem like a strategic enemy rather than partner, with attacks bubbling with venom in the run-up to an April 16 referendum on enhancing his powers.

Victory in that referendum handed Erdogan powers that critics fear will create one-man rule and take Ankara inexorably away from European values.

"The bases for a deeper political alliance through EU membership remain as they have always been. It will be up to Turkey's leaders, at some point in the future, to return to their earlier ambitions," said Pierini, a former EU ambassador to Ankara.

Despite the controversies surrounding Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric, Turkish officials fell over themselves to welcome the business tycoon as US leader, predicting



Mutual calculations. Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan shake hands prior to their talks in Putin's residence in Sochi, last May. (AP)

a new page in relations.

However, no progress materialised on the vexed issue of Turkey's desire to secure the extradition of Gulen, who denies any link to the coup, or US support for a Kurdish militia in Syria that Ankara sees as terrorists.

A much-touted visit by Erdogan to Washington to iron out these issues was overshadowed by a fracas involving his bodyguards that led to arrest warrants for 12 members of his security detail.

"While Ankara was very optimistic about the Trump presidency, none of Turkey's expectations from the new US administration were even partially fulfilled," said Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, director of the Ankara office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

In this context, the Saudi-led move to isolate Qatar over its alleged support for terrorism – claims that both Doha and Ankara reject – was the last thing Turkey needed.

Turkey had to some extent repaired ties with Saudi Arabia after a downturn in relations following Riyadh's support for the ousting of the pro-Ankara Morsi in Egypt. Now it finds itself dealing with a new environment in the Gulf, especially after the surprise elevation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz as next in line for the Saudi throne.

Qatar has emerged as possibly Turkey's number one ally, with Ankara even setting up a military base in the emirate and Erdogan building a strong bond with Emir Sheikh

Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani.

Kirisci said the crisis was "deeply disturbing for Turkey," with Riyadh snubbing Ankara's efforts at mediation.

Turkey is increasingly banking on a close relationship with Russia and has made much of a multipolar foreign policy, vastly expanding its diplomatic presence in Africa. Moscow, however, could prove a rickety crutch on which to rest Turkey's foreign policy.

"Turkish foreign policy is undergoing a severe test," said a European diplomatic source. "Things are going better with Russia but this is not a relationship that is founded on confidence."

(Agence France-Presse)

One year after the coup attempt: Turkey hijacked

Viewpoint



Yavuz Baydar

More than a year after a patchy military uprising, Turkey is entangled in its deepest systemic crisis ever. The coup attempt that began about 10pm on July 15, 2016, was an amateurish move to topple the elected government but seemingly an act of collective suicide. The institution that secular Turks had for long seen as the guarantor of its safety – the army – joined the fray.

The state and the rule of law were vulnerable to undemocratic interventions and the coup attempt exposed how divided, fragile and inefficient the disarrayed opposition was. No wonder that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the day after, called it "God's gift" and set out on an unchallengeable effort to transform Turkey into a republic whose course and fate are tied to his words and moods.

It was really a freak uprising about which all the key questions have been repeatedly asked without any convincing answers or proof provided. Almost everything about the build-up, background and choreography of the coup attempt remains a mystery.

The information available is limited. It helps understand that

the attempt was reported by an officer in the national intelligence service (MIT) at 2.30pm July 15, 2016, but the rest is blurred. The chief of staff was alarmed but the top general, Hulusi Akar, did not react properly. Neither he nor the director of MIT, Hakan Fidan, seemed to reach Erdogan, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim or members of the cabinet.

They were acting as everything was normal that night. Contacted at the weddings they were attending they were told no one had any idea about what was happening, though Akar was aware of what was going on.

The uprising was disorganised and doomed to fail. It was, as it were, designed to end so. Official data stated that only 1.5% of the army took part in the attempt. The reaction of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) also seemed suspicious. It took a very short time to organise people on the streets, to alert AKP municipalities to set in motion trucks to block the tanks and the mosques to broadcast prayers to call for resistance.

While the shackled media had only the official version to report, unable to investigate shady corners of the story, the only hope was that a parliamentary commission would scrutinise the questions that remained unanswered. It turned out to be a farce. Its chairman had fooled the opposition, it was revealed later, by failing to call four key witnesses of the night for testimony. Neither

Erdogan, nor Yildirim, nor Fidan, nor Akar appeared.

After a bumpy start, it took only days to disband the commission after Erdogan unlawfully declared it had done its job and the report it was expected to produce was declared null and void by the two opposition parties, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the People's Democratic Party (HDP), which published dissenting reports. Both called the uprising a move to seize control because it would be crucial for Erdogan to launch his counter-coup.

Several fiercely pro-Erdogan pundits called it a "hybrid coup," involving pro-NATO officers, those loyal to the secular ideals of the founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and followers of US-based Turkish Islamist preacher Fethullah Gulen. Two pundits wrote that they had been told by the prominent politicians of the AKP in Ankara days after the uprising that the coup attempt was the work of various commanders but for the sake of national unity the entire blame would be put on a group that is an object of hate in Turkey – the Gulenists.

Nobody questioned who had truly pushed the buttons and joined in wholeheartedly. To this day, none of the observers of Turkey with sound reason deny that Gulenists were behind the coup to a large extent but nobody can demonstrate with proof who led whom that night.

After the failed coup, an

The coup attempt exposed how divided, fragile and inefficient the disarrayed opposition was.

unprecedented witch-hunt was launched in public service, academia, media, the security apparatus and the army. About 160,000 people were fired from their jobs, 50,000 were arrested, 160 journalists imprisoned and academia was cleansed.

It is symbolic that Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the main opposition CHP, walked 420km from Ankara to Istanbul in a march for justice, signalling that that Turkey's crisis will be long-lasting, because Erdogan's opponents will not let go quietly.

Their adversary is more powerful than ever, however. Erdogan had a head start and he is determined to maintain the best tool he has a grip on. On July 12, he said emergency rule would continue "as long as we see necessary." In plain words, that means at least until the end of 2019, the year of presidential elections and the change to a political system of one-man rule.

The rule of law has collapsed in Turkey and the judiciary is an extension of Erdogan's palace. The parliament has been stripped of its powers of scrutiny and the media are probably more than 90% under the AKP's control.

Turkey from its allies' and friends' perspective is lost. The consequences will be far more costly in terms of democratic values and human dignity than ever imagined.

Yavuz Baydar is a Turkish journalist and occasional contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Turkey's crisis will be long-lasting, because Erdogan's opponents will not let go quietly.