



Turkish Diplomacy by the Numbers: A Decade of Trends

by [Hasim Tekines](#)

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Brief Analysis

Turkey has maintained strong dialogue with NATO and EU countries despite increasing differences regarding foreign policy matters. Meanwhile, Turkey's intensifying relations with authoritarian states is one of the striking trends between 2010 and 2020.

Turkey has been a diplomatically vigorous actor, particularly since the end of the Cold War. 'Zero problem with neighbors' was a leading foreign policy principle that informed the AKP-led government's [cordial relations](#) with all of Turkey's neighbors throughout 2000s until around the Arab Spring. Although Turkey has become militarily more aggressive and expansionist since 2010, the Turkish government still utilizes its diplomatic ties to achieve its foreign policy goals.

By examining data on the Turkish Foreign Ministry's [website](#)—which tracks meetings with foreign governments—one can broadly determine the shape of Ankara's high-level diplomatic relations over the last decade. Although not a complete and systematic record of Turkey's diplomatic activity, examining the changes in meetings over time still indicates major trends in Turkish diplomacy.

Turkey's Most Frequent Diplomatic Partners

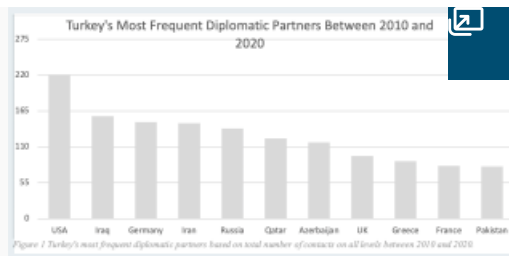


Figure 1 Turkey's most frequent diplomatic partners based on total number of contacts on all levels between 2010 and 2020

Turkey's top diplomatic contacts vary considerably from each other. Turkey's major foreign policy priorities—NATO and EU partnerships, trade relations, regional issues, energy relations, border issues, and ideological closeness—are likely influential in this way.

However, it is important to note that high levels of diplomatic contact do not necessarily equal stronger, healthier bilateral relations. While the United States ranks highest in this category as Turkey's top diplomatic counterpart, relations between the two countries have slid from a 'strategic partnership' to what U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has referred to as a 'so-called strategic partner' over the last decade, due to disagreements over U.S.-PYD relations and Turkey's S-400 purchase, among other matters. Moreover, Turkey has serious conflicts with Russia—another frequent diplomatic partner—in Syria, Libya, Ukraine, and Karabakh.

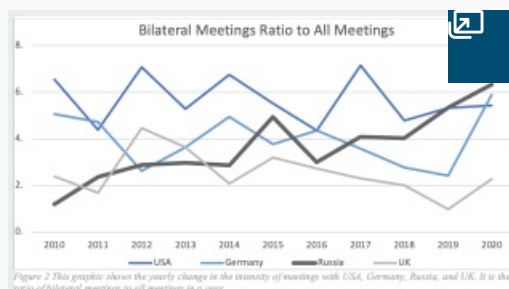
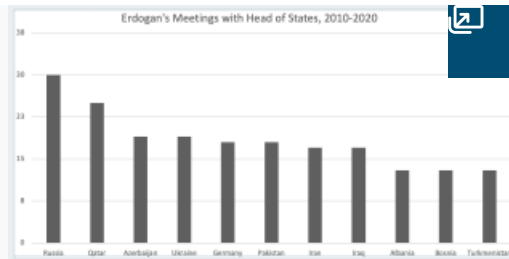


Figure 2 This graphic shows the yearly change in the intensity of meetings with USA, Germany, Russia, and UK. It is the ratio of bilateral meetings to all meetings in a year.

In addition to the United States, four other NATO countries are among Turkey's most frequent diplomatic contacts. Therefore, it is not for lack of communication that Turkey's relationship with the West has deteriorated. The numbers debunk the idea that Turkey 'is only listened to when it uses force.' Turkish policy makers have had more opportunities to exchange ideas and resolve differences with the United States and Germany than with Iran and Russia.

That being said, the most striking trend in Turkish diplomacy between 2010-2020 has been the dramatic rise in Turkey-Russia meetings. Aside from the significant effects of the 2015 Russian jet crisis, when Turkey's downing of a Russian Su-24 jet at the Turkish-Syrian border strained bilateral ties, Turkey's diplomatic relations with Russia have strengthened steadily.

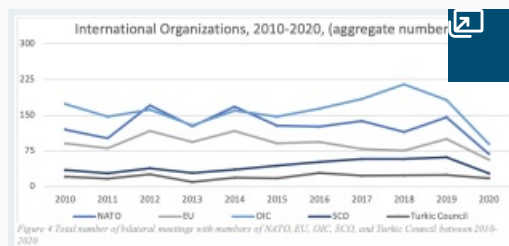
Erdogan's Diplomacy



Ahmet Necdet Sezer, Turkey's 10th president, was not a frequent visitor of foreign countries. During his tenure of seven years, President Sezer made only 49 visits, which amount to 7 visits a year. Since Abdullah Gul's presidency in 2007, the Turkish president has played an active role in Turkish diplomacy. Throughout the 2010s, Presidents Gul and Erdogan carried out approximately one of every four high-level meetings with diplomatic contacts. U.S. government officials and members of Congress have been the Turkish presidents' most frequent diplomatic contacts.

In terms of meetings with heads of state, however, Turkey's top contacts are significantly different. Gul and particularly Erdogan met mostly with Russian President Vladimir Putin, while only one Western partner, Germany, ranks among the top ten countries in this category. One fifth of all high-level meetings between Turkey and Russia have been carried out at the presidential level. In contrast, the proportion of president-to-president meetings in Turkey-U.S. relations is 1 in 20. In 2014, when the rupture between Turkish and US presidents came to a head, Erdogan complained about not being able to meet with Obama as 15 months had passed since their last bilateral meeting. Yet Erdogan established an exceptional relationship with President Trump and frequently spoke to him by phone, often bypassing regular bureaucratic channels. This shows that institutional ties that have been established usually by technocrats through ministries and international organizations play a bigger role in Turkey's ties with western countries, whereas Erdogan's personal ties are generally stronger and more influential with non-Western partners.

Country Groups Based on International Organizations



The aggregate number of Turkey's meetings with countries in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was higher than any other body measured throughout 2010s and in recent years, except in 2012 and 2014. The fact that the OIC has a larger amount of members than other international organizations measured certainly influenced this metric. Still, the increase in Ankara's diplomatic contacts with OIC countries between 2016 and 2019 is noteworthy. The AKP government's campaign against Gulenists after an attempted coup that the Turkish government blamed on Gulen and the AKP's heightened Islamist-nationalist discourse may have impacted this, as Ankara's pressures yielded increased support for Turkey from Muslim countries in the OIC and the Turkic Council.

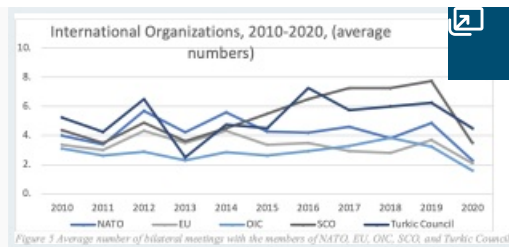


Figure 3 Average number of bilateral meetings with the members of NATO, EU, OIC, SCO, and Turkic Council

Despite Turkey’s rising authoritarianism and deterioration of democratic values, rule of law, and human rights, there has been no significant impact on Ankara’s contacts with NATO and EU countries. Institutional ties, geopolitical realities, and economic ties may explain this, as these partners have maintained communication channels despite conflicts over these subjects.

At the same time, there has been a notable increase in Ankara’s diplomatic meetings with more authoritarian states, which fall under organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Turkic Council. Authoritarian fellowship and shifting global power balances may have been influential in this rise.

Lastly, Turkey might seek to gain leverage against Russia by increasing its influence on the Central Asian and Caucasian countries. The Turkic Council allows Ankara to utilize its shared language, culture, and Turkic identity to reach those countries.

Regional Focus

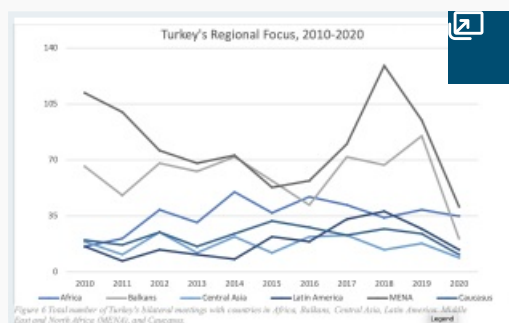


Figure 4 Total number of Turkey's bilateral meetings with countries in Africa, Balkans, Central Asia, Latin America, Middle East, and Caucasus (2010-2020)

Turkey’s closest neighbors—countries in the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus, have received the bulk of Ankara’s attention.

Following the Arab Spring, Turkey’s diplomatic activism in the Middle East slowed significantly—until 2015. At the time, Erdogan’s advisor İbrahim Kalın described Turkey’s position as ‘valuable loneliness.’ 2016 was an important turning point for Turkey in many ways, including with regard to its policies towards the Middle East. From September 2015 onwards, Russia dashed the Turkish government’s aspirations in Syria. Erdogan dismissed PM Davutoglu, the key figure behind Turkey’s Arab Spring-era policies, and embraced a more pragmatist policy line with regard to the region. Then, Ankara moved towards normalizing relations with Russia, Israel, and the UAE in 2016. Each of these moves reinvigorated Turkish diplomacy in the region. On top of that, the 2017 Qatar crisis and Turkey’s subsequent closeness to Doha are factors that intensified Turkey’s contacts with the Middle East.

The graphics also demonstrate the results of Turkey’s diplomatic openings to Africa and Latin America. Africa is the only region where Turkey’s number of diplomatic contacts did not decrease during the COVID era. Between 2011 and 2018, Turkey’s diplomatic contacts in Latin America increased as well. Between 2016 and 2019, Turkey-Venezuela relations, motivated in part by the gold trade, were a driving force of this increase. While Ankara had only

3 high-level bilateral meetings with Caracas between 2010 and 2015, this number rose to 17 in 2018.

Trilateral Mechanisms

Country 1	Country 2	Number of
Afghanistan	Pakistan	6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Croatia	4
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Serbia	17
Qatar	Syria	2
Brazil	Iran	2
Azerbaijan	Turkmenistan	7
Azerbaijan	Iran	7
Azerbaijan	Georgia	17
Brazil	Sweden	1
Saudi Arabia	Qatar	1
Poland	Romania	8
Russia	USA	1
Iran	Russia	20
Azerbaijan	Pakistan	1
Malaysia	Pakistan	1
Libya	Malta	2

Trilateral mechanisms are important instruments of Turkish diplomacy, particularly for discussing regional issues. Since trilateral meetings are less bureaucratic, flexible, and binding, they can serve as an effective communication channel between regional actors and are also useful in highlighting Ankara's role as a mediator and a power broker. Meetings between [Turkey, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), as well as those between [Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia](#) exemplify how Ankara uses this instrument to shape regional diplomacy.

In contrast, Russia-Iran-Turkey meetings, also known as the "[Astana Process](#)" talks, were more of a Russian and Iranian mechanism to keep Turkey in line with their own Syria policies.

Domestic Factors

Domestic developments have also influenced Turkey's diplomatic relations. The political challenges facing Erdogan through Turkey's domestic politics have slowed Turkey's diplomatic activism. There was a significant decrease in Turkey's number of diplomatic meetings in 2013 and 2015. The [Gezi demonstrations](#) in 2013 and Erdogan's election loss in 2015 were major domestic challenges that distracted his attention from foreign policy. Although it is not possible to say to which direction domestic upheavals lead Turkish diplomacy with these figures, they should not be discounted as likewise having some impact on Turkey's diplomatic priorities.

Key Takeaways

Despite its troubles in foreign policy, Turkey is not a diplomatically isolated country, except for a brief period of contraction which is relevant for its relations with Middle Eastern countries. And although Turkey's relations with NATO and EU partners have been deteriorating throughout the 2010s, Western countries are still among Ankara's most frequent diplomatic contacts. Yet, apparently, diplomacy is incapable of keeping relations from getting worse. Turkey's strengthening authoritarianism, deteriorating rule of law, and weakening democracy have not decreased the number of diplomatic meetings with democratic countries. The need to manage issues like Syria, S-400, Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, refugee flow, and others has encouraged sides to stay in dialogue. However, increasing traffic between Turkey and other authoritarian states, particularly Russia, is one of the dominant trends of Turkish diplomacy between 2010 and 2020.

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