Constructing Centrality in Turkish and British Foreign Policy – Thomas Krumm

Abstract

Despite different trajectories of coping with their imperial past, Turkey and the UK have developed comparable narratives to establish a sense of their own centrality vis-à-vis the European integration project. In the British case, this discourse can be traced back to Churchill's famous 'three majestic circles' speech of 1948, placing the UK in the cut of the English speaking world, the Commonwealth, and Europe. In Turkish foreign policy, more recently ideas of a reorientation have been circulated, aiming to take advantage of its central position at the crossroads of three continents were articulated. This essay compares structure and function of these narratives under the aspect of

regionalisation, of role taking and role shaping vis-à-vis 'Europe'.

Introduction

After the demise of the cold war, regionalisation became one of the big trends in the international system (Falk 1995). As the concept of globalisation became successively overstretched, IR theory turned to concepts like regionalisation or multipolarity, among others (Schulze 2018). The demise of the bipolar global order led to the emergence of competitive regional power centres and (new) regional collaboration and integration attempts. Regional International Organisations and Free Trade Agreements play an important role in this process; however, nation states remain important actors in the international system, too. For regional powers the multi-polar order offers additional leeway for alliance politics beyond simple centre-periphery divides.

Regionalisation in a broad sense means an increased social, economic, political or cultural exchange between the people, organisations and authorities of a certain area. Trade, finance, tourism and migration are some examples of functional regionalisation. In addition, regionalism adds an element of institutional integration and an idea of a common identity to this process.[i] Regionalism often works hand in hand with centre-periphery schemata. The US is seen the centre of North America (and the US-Mexico-Canada free trade agreement), Nigeria of ECOWAS, and the Franco-German axis of the EU. For the latter, its attraction as a liberal democratic model for 'peripheral' and transformation states has been questioned (Öniş & Kutlay 2019, 2020). Especially after the cold war, regionalisation expanded from security to economic cooperation. The EU-Turkish customs union (CU, effective since 1996, see Altay 2018) is one example of this change. However, these early agreements (the 1994 NAFTA is another example) were characterised by a low level of institutionalisation. The EU-Turkey customs union covered only industrial products, for instance. NAFTA was renegotiated in 2018 as USMCA, while talks on an EU-Turkey CU upgrade to include the agriculture and service sector are at rest.

With the rise of the modern nation state in the 19th century as the dominant form of collective identity and political organisation (see Stein Rokkan's cleavage theory for instance), the centre/periphery distinction became a prominent pattern of interpretation. The centralisation of nation states was driven by nationalists and liberals in fields such as cultural and economic standardisation. It faced resistance from regionalists, ethnic and linguistic minorities and their representation as political parties. The centre-periphery cleavage overlapped with the state-church cleavage with its clash between a secular state and religious (church) and aristocratic privileges and influences in politics, giving rise to conservative and religious parties. For the United Kingdom, the centre has always been London, whereas the periphery changed from Ireland for instance to Wales and Scotland nowadays. In Turkey, the centre has always been Istanbul, even as the function of capital moved to Ankara. However, both at domestic and international level, it is not popular to be characterised as a peripheral region.

Claiming centrality in international relations is not the same as centralisation in the process of nation building. In international political economy, Wallerstein's Marxist inspired theory of a World System became influential since the 1970s. It observed global economic relations with the interpretation pattern of an industrialised and developed core of capitalist countries, a semi periphery of aspiring and partially industrialising countries, and exploited and underdeveloped peripheral countries (Wallerstein 1999). In International Relations theory, the centre-periphery ascriptions often functions more implicitly. Öniş and Kutlay (2020) see the "liberal core" of the European integration project under pressure from an "emergent illiberal bloc" at the periphery, limiting the EU's transformative power (Öniş and Kutlay 2019) and even creating chances of reverse transformation at its liberal core.

Thus, the aim of this essay is to reconstruct centre-periphery rhetoric as a pattern of interpretation in IR, especially in the context of regionalisation. It argues that the strive for centrality (inversely: avoiding periphery status) indicates a typical form of regionalism especially within successors of former Empires such as Turkey and the UK. Centrality is more than a geographical location; multilateralism as a prerequisite of regionalism is a relatively new development in the history of international relations, with the post WWII European integration

project as its most prominent example.

Constructing centrality: What do theories of regionalisation say?

While optimists regard regionalization as a step to overcome nationalism, globalists focus on its shortcomings compared to truly global and multilateral institutions. Theoretical contributions debate whether regionalization threatens to break up the liberal global economic order into rival economic blocs or whether regional agreements are compatible with a multilateral global order and even constitute building blocks for further deepening international cooperation or standardization. Regarding labour market policy, Tsarouhas and Ladi (2013: 481) suggest that the EU respectively "Europeanisation could be conceived as a facet of globalisation rather than as a bulwark to it".

For neoliberals, political and economic cooperation is best applied at the global level, as regional integration poses a danger of distorting competition and reducing welfare gains by trade diversion, for instance, of the global system (Ravenhill 2011: 178). In contrast, neo-institutional approaches on international regimes (Keohane 1984) are much more open to regional integration and international institutions. Their arguments are based less on a balance of power than on mutual benefits. In this approach, regions are not based on pre-existing communities or identities, but are formed according to functional or utilitarian needs. Regional integration can solve problems of collective action by reducing transaction costs, extending the time horizon of political action for longer periods and fostering the provision of public goods.

Similarly, constructivists argue that regions are not created on the basis of geographical proximity or pre-existing common ground, but through processes of active social, cultural and political identity formation. As a social construct, regions have no 'natural' borders; geographical, social, political and cultural factors that can be used to determine boundaries are usually not congruent.

Dependency theories and world system theory focus on the stratified capitalist world system with some metropolitan cores and large heterogeneous, dependent peripheries. Neostructuralists such as Wallerstein (1999) derive regionalization from the functional requirements of the capitalist world economy. They assume that European integration is driven by the international division of labour. It is politics that follows (and serves) the economy, they assume. The international competition of the 'multinationals' with their 'economies of scale' and technological advances more or less enforce a 'politics of scale'. Resulting policies are oriented towards further intensifying capitalist competition, they argue, with varying degrees of state involvement and in extreme case even state capitalism. Capital accumulation is most advanced in the triad (North America, Western Europe, and East Asia), while other regions are structurally subordinated.[ii] As long as the capitalist world system continues, these differentiations will sustain. This theory is much more rigid than the liberal and institutional ones. For Turkey, this approach offers no perspective of catching up with Western Europe or East Asia, while the post-Brexit UK faced the challenge of relegation to second league.

The Turkish case

The 'Westernisation' of the Ottoman Empire as an attempt to fight back its looming relapse vis a vis the emerging European nation states was intensified by the Young Turks and Ataturk. One of the side effects of this process was that Turkey found itself in a position at the European periphery.[iii] In 1952, Turkey and Greece joint NATO to strengthen the south-east flank of the alliance and deter the Soviet Union. Joining the institutions of the 'strategic West' (Cagaptay 2020: 271) nurtured sentiments of a peripheral position not adequate to the successor of the Ottoman Empire. This perception leads to articulations of a need for a strong Turkey as a worthy successor of the lost Empire, especially in the centre-right political spectrum with Süleyman Demirel's book about "Büyük Türkiye" as an example (Uzer 2018: 347). Also Bülent Ecevit in the 1970s advocated "the idea of 'region-centric foreign policy', suggesting that Ankara would be better off diversifying its ties beyond the West, building links with Soviet Russia as well as with states in the Balkans and the Middle East." (Cagaptay 2020: 47)

The end of the cold war opened up new possibilities for redefining foreign policy goals, and for instance relations with the Balkan states were intensified. Also, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline emerged in this time and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) as a model of regional economic integration was set up in 1992 upon Turkey's initiative. In addition to the littoral states Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine, it comprises Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece, Moldavia and Serbia. However, due to regional tensions and heterogeneity, the BSEC remained largely ineffective. "Nevertheless, the initiative spoke volumes regarding Turkey's desire to engage with new foreign policy actors, beyond its traditional partners in the West, at the turn of the century." (Cagaptay 2020: 17).

With the change in government in 2002, the perception of Turkey's position was further shifted from (European) periphery to being its own centre. A Daily Sabah columnist for instance observed that "particularly during the last decade, Turkey-centric thinking has predominated among the state elite." (Aktaş 2020: 6) As dependencies of foreign investments from the triad (Western Europe, North America, and East Asia) continue to exist, this process is understood as incremental and non-exclusive.

In this early period of the AKP rule, the strategic depth doctrine (*stratejik derinlik*) of then foreign minister Davutoğlu became influential, which focused on Turkey to "become a central state (*merkez ülke*) in its region and follow a 'multidimensional foreign policy,' using the Middle East as its hinterland." (Uzer 2013: 103). In addition to this strategic reorientation, the former lands of the Ottoman Empire gained special interest. "As a major country in the midst of the Afro-Eurasia landmass, Turkey is a central country with multiple regional identities that cannot be reduced to one, unified category. In terms of its sphere of influence, Turkey is a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country all at the same time." (Davutoğlu 2008: 77) Interestingly, 'Europe' is not mentioned in this list of spheres of influence. This shift from European periphery to its own centre comes out clear in the next sequence: "Turkey should appropriate a new position in its region by providing security and stability not only for itself but also for its neighbors and the region", which "will make Turkey a global actor as we

approach 2023" (ibid.) At that time, foreign policy-makers considered Turkey not to be a 'bridge', "but rather a 'pivotal' state in the region." (Yavus 2009: 203)

This shift from European periphery to its own centre was further amplified by historical allusions both from Ottoman and Republican (upcoming 100[th]anniversary) history and the goal of reviving a great power status ("global actor"). Recent Turkish governments increasingly aimed for manoeuvring Turkey out of the orbit of the great powers, aiming to form its own place as a "stand alone power" (Cagaptay 2020: 18). This does not mean breaking up relations with the West, but reduce dependency by looking out for new partners in the region and beyond. The Astana peace talks for Syria with Russia and Iran are an example of this policy. However, they also illustrate the difficulties of regional relations and the persistency needed to achieve even small progress.[iv]

The British case

Since the end of the Second World War, British foreign policy has grappled with the dilemma of balancing its interests between the special relationship with the US, the close economic, social and political ties with continental Europe, and the Commonwealth of the former Empire. The focus on the special relationship rarely pays off, as Tony Blair had to experience after blindly following George Bush in 2003 into the Iraq war. The idea of a special relationship is based on commonalities of language, culture and history. However, it is often more rhetoric than substance, symbolizing global ambitions on par with the US.

In contrast to France's violent loss of Algeria and Indo-China, decolonization of the British Empire was mostly pragmatic and peaceful. The remnants of the Empire were transformed into the Commonwealth of Nations. However, it took until 1960 that a UK government (Macmillan) turned to the European integration project. The motivation was primarily economic; membership in the European Economic Community (EEC) was seen as a cure to the "under-performing economy" of low growth and competitiveness (Leach et al. 2006: 23). After French

vetoes in 1963 and 67, the bid of the conservative Heath government finally succeeded (after de Gaulle had passed away). A domestic referendum in 1975 removed the topic from the agenda for some years.

Winston Churchill in a famous speech at Fulton, Missouri, in 1946 not only coined the metaphor of an 'iron curtain' that has descended across Europe, but also outlined "his view of Britain's place in the world after the convulsions of the Second World War. Britain, he argued, was at the centre of three circles of interest, influence and sentiment: the circle of the Empire, the circle of the English-speaking peoples, and the circle of Europe." (Gamble 2011: 302) In Churchill's own words:

"As I look out upon the future of our country in the changing scene of human destiny I feel the existence of three great circles among the free nations and democracies. I almost wish I had a blackboard. I would make a picture for you…. The first circle for us is naturally the British Commonwealth and Empire, with all that that comprises. Then there is also the English-speaking world in which we, Canada, and the other British Dominions and the United States play so important a part. And finally there is United Europe. These three majestic circles are co-existent and if they are linked together there is no force or combination which could overthrow them or even challenge them." (Churchill, cited by Davis 2013: 92).

The first of these circles has meanwhile diminished, while the remaining ones "increasingly defined Britain's place in the world in 2010, despite some remaining Commonwealth ties. But both were troubled relationships, and Britain was not at ease with either of them, although for different reasons." (Gamble 2011: 302f.) While this position stressed the continuing relevance of the three circles metaphor, others are less positive about its added value for (analyzing) British foreign policy "particularly from those who have argued that Britain after 1945 was trying to hold onto an increasingly untenable, and over-ambitious position in the world. According to this view the three circles concept is perhaps a witty and ingenious expression but nonetheless a fanciful one, a reflection of British decision makers' tendency to hold too high an opinion of their country's abilities

to influence world affairs and of its value to others." (Davis 2013) In other words, Churchill's aspiration to secure Britain a place at the very centre of the three circles was beyond its capacity, Davis (2013) claims.

Most recently, the Brexit decision revealed the strong nostalgic illusionism still prevalent across British elites and society. The narrow Brexit majority of the June 2016 referendum was nurtured by the delusion of still being a global power with global interests and networks and having the potential to act on a par with the US.

More recently, a Whitehall policy paper on foreign and security policy concluded that the "UK's most important foreign policy and security partners will remain its fellow members of the Euro-Atlantic community. However, the UK is more likely to be able to avoid being a 'policy follower' of either the US or the EU if it retains the ability, and will, to say no to both." (Chalmers 2020: 1) Instead of being absorbed by US or EU policy interests, the "UK's key medium-term objectives should therefore be to maintain and develop its capacity (including intelligence and military capability) for working with a variety of allies." (ibid.: 1) With Cagaptay's term, the strategic West will remain crucial for the safety of economic and security interests, but "the UK's ability to effectively promote its national interests requires some rethinking of this uniquely high level of asymmetric dependence." (ibid.: 8).

Conclusion

What can be learned from these two cases? In both foreign policy discourses, there were voices aiming to shift their country from a perceived (European) periphery to a central position based on its own capacity and tradition. However, ideas of reinventing centrality need to be balanced between nostalgia and a healthy sense of pragmatism in order to avoid inflated expectations and thus disappointments. As successors of former empires, both Turkey and the UK are at risk of developing "an inflated sense of their heyday. This, of course, leads to a readiness to be inspired, or a vulnerability to be manipulated, by effective

politicians who are able to embody and speak to this narrative." (Cagaptay 2020: xv)

The special position in each case is constructed by an image of different, but interlinked circles of interest in which the country takes part in. This image of being located at the centre of such circles offers a normative and an analytical perspective. Churchill's emphasis on the challenge resulting from this position matches some present day policymaker's mindset: "If we rise to the occasion in the years that are to come it may be found that once again we hold the key to opening a safe and happy future to humanity, and will gain for ourselves gratitude and fame." (Churchill 1948, cited in Davis 2013) However, there are also significant differences. Churchill's rhetoric was much more normative and visionary than current doctrines and policies, which show much more realism. The circle of the English speaking world does not directly translate into the Turkish speaking world or the community of Muslim majority nations as organised in the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), for instance. And, there is no equivalent to the British Commonwealth among the former Ottoman nations. Also the third circle of European identity does not translate neatly to the Turkish case. However, despite these differences it is obvious that in both cases importance is given to constructing their own sense of centrality within its regional sphere of interests, aiming to resist the global powers and their regional meddling.

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[i]   Regionalisation at subnational level is not in the focus of this essay

[ii]   "This world-system came into existence in the course of the sixteenth century, and its original division of labor included in its bounds much of Europe (but not the Russian or Ottoman Empires) and parts of the Americas. [...] The capitalist world-system is constituted by a world-economy dominated by core-peripheral relations and a political structure consisting of sovereign states within the framework of an interstate system." (Wallerstein 1999: 35)

[iii]   "As Western culture penetrated the tiniest aspects of life, enlightened thought condemned the whole non-Western world as an underdeveloped, archaic and superficial space. From this hegemonic perspective, the Western world appeared as the enlightened and developed side of humanity, while the rest of the world was deemed its dark side." (Aktaş 2020. 6)

[iv]   See for further limits of regionalization Quilliam (2020: 130): "Turkey's reach into the Gulf is limited to Qatar for the time being, northern Syria in the Levant and Tunisia in the Maghreb."

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