

EXPLORING THE BILATERAL AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF TURKEY AND IRAN: HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES DRAWN FROM THE COLD WAR PERIOD

Dr Govind Setty

**Associate Professor, Department of History, Government First Grade College,
Hosakote, Karnataka**

ABSTRACT

The 45-year period, which covers 1945-1990 is known as the “Cold War” period in the literature of international relations. It has many features which have been determined by the results of World War II. While efforts have been made to compensate for the destructive effects of the war, especially in Europe, and to improve the economies, on the other hand, most of the countries were divided into two major groups. These two groups are defined as the Capitalist Western World led by the United States and the Communist Eastern World led by the Soviet Union. There was fierce competition in the political, economic and military fields between the two groups. Bipolarity was a global phenomenon. As the two important states of Middle East, Turkey and Iran heavily felt the effects of the new situation and their chances of staying neutral were very low. Turkey became a NATO member and, in this manner, made a formal alliance with the Western Bloc i.e., the Capitalist Western World which was led by the United States of America. Although fluctuations were observed in the bilateral relations of Iran and America, there was a close bond between them until the 1979 revolution in Iran. Iran changed dramatically in the aftermath of 1979 revolution and a new page started in the history of this country. One of the basic mottos of Turkish foreign relations is not to interfere with domestic issues of neighbours. The nationalist-socialist winds blowing under the leadership of Egypt initiated a popular movement in Arab world. Turkey, conceiving her isolation, began establishing closer ties with the countries of the region including Palestine. Iran was also aware of the costs of being extreme Pro-American and signed commercial treaties with Soviets. The research presents a historical perspective of the bilateral and international relations of Turkey and Iran during the Cold War period. It has discovered that one of the problems concerning fluctuations in the bilateral relations was the isolation of these countries in the Middle East.

Keywords: Capitalist Western World, Cold War, Communist Eastern World, Iran, Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

The results of the World War II (WW II) paved the way for a new global political order in recent history. Two victorious nations, the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) which was popularly known as the Soviet Union, emerged as super powers and became the leaders of the global political arena. The new status was characterized by its bipolar nature where the Western Bloc represented capitalism, democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression. The major organization of the Western Bloc was NATO, established on April 4, 1949, with twelve founding members. The organization was military in nature and expanded with addition of new members in the 1950s. On the other hand, the Eastern Bloc stemmed from socialist ideology, claimed solidarity of socialist governments and strongly supported state-controlled economy. The Warsaw Pact was signed on May 14, 1955 by eight socialist east European countries, as a collective defence treaty to counteract NATO.

The main area of conflict between the two sides was Europe, which was a natural consequence because the most devastating effects of WW II were being suffered mostly in the old continent. Europe was practically divided into two parts and only a few countries were able to keep their neutrality like Switzerland. English Prime Minister Winston Churchill used the words “Iron Curtain” to describe this reality during a speech he delivered on March 5th, 1946 at Fulton, Missouri.

The hostility surrendered the whole world and the leaders of the blocks searched for their interest everywhere. Middle East was no exception to being a battle field, Turkey and Iran inevitably felt the difficulties of this period called “Cold War”. The unconditional surrender of Germany on May 1945 on Eastern and Western fronts and the similar surrender of Japan on September 2nd, 1945 mark decisively the end of Pacific War and most importantly the official end of WW II.

Bernard Baruch, adviser to President Harry S. Truman, was the first political figure to pronounce the words of “Cold War” on April 16, 1947 to describe the nature of relations between US and Soviets. While historians propose different incidents and perceptions as the roots of Cold War, the breakdown of Soviet Union and associated disintegration of the Eastern Bloc marks the end of Cold War. The war profit expectations of the victorious states began to shape the new era in human history. The first step was to fill the power gap resulting from the defeat of Nazi Germany. The war time allies no longer stayed as so and the struggle virtually started after WW II.

One important contribution to influence American foreign policy was the famous “long telegram” written by a junior diplomat at US embassy in Moscow. George Kennan was completely aware of the real nature of Russian intentions and reported that the target was maximum expansion. This policy was a combination of present Soviet ideology and Tsarist ambitions of the past. He commented about Soviet leader Stalin, noting that he regards Western Capitalism as an enemy. Kennan thought that reconciliation of US and Russian ideologies and interests would be impossible.

Cold War was characterized by enormous nuclear proliferation, exaggerated budgets for conventional armament, space competition and efforts to suppress the capacities of the opponent in every possible way. Both sides carefully refrained from direct military action against each other, since balance of horror made it clear that a war between US and Soviet Russia would definitely end with a Pirus victory. Leader states tried to access and control natural resources and geostrategic areas on global scale by gaining allies and expanded their zone of influence. Propaganda and proxy wars were other instruments that played an important role during the Cold War.

The tension between blocks was intensified in north-east Asia in fifties, in south-east Asia in sixties, in Middle East in seventies and finally in Central America in eighties. This era was featured by local confrontations but, the world faced some events which inevitably threatened the relative peace and the delicate equilibrium.

BILATERAL AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF TURKEY AND IRAN: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE COLD WAR PERIOD

Turkish Foreign Policy during the Cold War Period: The end of World War I facilitated the fall of Ottoman Empire, which was declining in every aspect since the last two centuries. The invasion of Anatolia by foreign forces stimulated Mustafa Kemal, afterwards named Atatürk, to initiate a War of Liberation which successfully ended on September 9th, 1922. The establishment of a new nation state, Turkish Republic, was officially announced the next year.

Territorial integrity, international political recognition and necessary reforms for transition from a six-century old cosmopolitan empire to a modern state were the main concerns of the Turkish Republic.

Ismet Inonu who succeeded Ataturk as the second president after his death on November 10th, 1938 was an Ottoman general, commander in chief of the West Front during the War of Liberation and the first Prime Minister of the republic. He absolutely knew the military and economic deficiencies of the country and he took full responsibility of foreign affairs during the course of WW II. These times were double edged sword for Turkey and she did her best to preserve the equilibrium between axis and allies. President Inonu's main problem was to maintain neutrality and refrain from being actively involved in the war. Neutrality can be defined as active neutrality since Turkey maintained good relations with both sides for a long time. Inonu's policy of "wait and see" in order to gain time and his efforts to preserve status quo was simulated playing on razor's edge and was criticized by some circles as being opportunistic (Deringil, 1989: Chapter 8 pp. 18). Adolf Hitler sent a letter to Inonu on March 1st, 1941 assuring him that German troops in Bulgaria had no intention of threatening Turkish territory and country's political structure. Inonu responded positively and ultimately a friendship and non-aggression treaty was signed between two countries on June 18th, 1941. Turkey's export of 90,000 tons of chromium to Germany was a reflection of this friendship. Turkish Republic and Soviets signed an agreement of "neutrality and non-aggression" on December 17th, 1925. As the renewal date of the treaty was approaching, Soviets notified Turkish government that they shall not extend the old treaty and instead discuss the situation in the light of current military and political changes. Soviet demands included construction of land and naval bases in Bosphorus, common control of Turkish straits and changes in the Turkish-Soviet border in favour the latter. These were refused by the Turkish government.

Potsdam Conference was held in 1944 lasting from mid-July until early August. Russians proposed free passage of their ship through Turkish straits, a naval base and an international status for Bosphorus and Dardanelles. These demands meant serious changes of Montreux treaty which authorized Turkey over the control of the straits. American president Harry Truman did not object free passage of Russian ships but he refused the idea of constructing a Russian naval base. The conference did not arrive to a concrete conclusion about the issue.

President Inonu realized that Turkey would face isolation in the post-war era if Turkey does not act together with alliance and not take responsibility. This meant not receiving British and US economic and military aid which eventually make Turkey more vulnerable to Russian threat. Turkey formally declared war to Germany and to Japan on 23rd February, 1945 without actually being in the war. This was just before San Francisco meeting for the establishment of United Nations (UN). Turkey desired to be one of the founding members of UN.

The Korean Civil War was viewed by the new elected Democratic Party administration as an opportunity for NATO membership. Turkey's previous application was rejected, particularly with strong opposition of England. Prime Minister Adnan Menderes' government sent an initial military force of 4,500 without the approval of the Turkish General Assembly. Additional 1,500 men were sent afterwards. The contribution of Turkish troops and their bravery during Korean war paved the way for NATO membership, which finalized in 1952.

In fifties, Turkish foreign policy was totally pro-American, practically reaching to maximum military, economic and political dependence. In sixties, a chain of events caused Turkish rulers to review relation with US. The first of these was the U2 plane which took off from Incirlik Air Base in Southern Turkey. The plane was shut down in Russia. Pilot Gary Powers survived but he was captured and sentenced to ten years of imprisonment. Turkey was not informed about these spying flights. Russian Communist Party General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev warned that any nation permitting their land for similar action would be considered as target.

The American administration discovered Soviet ballistic missile deployment in Cuba on October 1962 and the very dangerous conflict called “Cuban Missile Crisis” brought the World to the edge of nuclear warfare. President John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev arrived at an agreement after ten days of intense diplomatic communication. The sides agreed for reciprocal removal of missiles which meant removal of Jupiter missiles launched in Turkey. The reasonable approach of two leaders avoided a possible third World War and marked the start of *Détente*. The early beneficial results of the agreement were the establishment of a direct telephone line between the White House and Kremlin Palace and signing of an antinuclear treaty limiting nuclear testing only to underground. Turkish decision makers saw that if Cuban crisis had not been solved peacefully then Turkey would have been the initial target for Russia.

President Lyndon Johnson’s rude letter to Prime Minister Ismet Inonu stating not to use American weapons in Cyprus conflict became one of the milestones for Turkish foreign policy because, Johnson’s letter revealed that total loyalty to US has been a mistake.

Armenian issue also caused frustration in US-Turkish relations. The American missionary activities that increased in the second half of 19th century in Ottoman Empire and in Middle East created an atmosphere of sympathy for Armenians. Events of 1915 was defined as genocide by Armenians and allegations against Turkey intensified over the years. Hostility and strong desire for revenge continued for generations. Parliaments of many countries passed laws recognizing 1915 events as genocide and American Congress kept the issue as a pendulous sword each year.

Iranian Foreign Policy during the Cold War Period: Reza Khan, afterwards Reza Shah Pahlavi, in command of Persian Cossack Brigade realized a military coup on 21st February, 1921 in Tehran. He climbed the steps of power rapidly and became the unquestioned ruler of the country (Ghani, 1998: Chapter 7 pp. 23).

His main goal was to build a secular nation state. He strongly believed in powerful central authority, independent foreign policy and in strong army. He was a nationalist, anti-communist and tried hard for achievement of national identity. His regime was a military monarchy.

Reza Shah could not resist the pressure from great powers and ultimately waived the throne in favour of his son. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi became the king of Iran on 16th September, 1941. In the early days of Mohammed Shah’s rule, a relatively free atmosphere was created but simultaneously the central authority weakened and problems began to emerge.

Soviets occupied the northern Iran on 25th August, 1941 and British invaded the south. Iranian government resigned and US forces were launched on September 1941.

The Iranian corridor was vital for transportation of equipment and arms to Soviets and to overcome the German invasion of Russia known as “Barbarossa Operation”. Treaty signed by Anglo-Soviet-Iran considered Iran as an ally, recognized and protected territorial integrity and political independence of the country and promised compensation for war losses due to occupation. Foreign military forces were to leave Iran latest six months after the war was over. While US and British withdrew in a timely manner Soviets refrained from doing so and instead reinforced their existence in northern Iran and in Azerbaijan. Soviets left Iran and Azerbaijan only after the determined insistence of US and following a critical diplomatic process.

Mohammed Mosaddeq gathered various nationalist groups under the umbrella of “National Front”. He strongly defended the idea of nationalizing the oil industry. He was appointed as Prime Minister on August 30, 1951 and only two days after the parliament passed the law nationalizing the Anglo Iranian Oil Company. British reaction was to take back all English technicians in oil industry, blockade of Abadan Bay, signing an agreement with Aramco oil company and importing oil from Saudi Arabia. The British also carried the case to Security Council of UN. All these measures naturally resulted in marked decrease of Iran’s oil export, inflation and unemployment. Americans were worried about England’s tough approach fearing that Iran would incline towards Soviets. British explicitly proposed US to remove Mosaddeq and substitute him with a pro-western figure. A joint mission organized by CIA and British called “Ajax Operation” removed Mosaddeq from power. Shah while in exile at that time returned home from Italy. He, after a while confessed during a private conversation, that he owed his throne primarily to God and secondly to Americans. This event was a turning point in recent Iran history. As the Shah’s dependence to US climbed, ironically enough, the public opinion about America gradually began to worsen and it reached its climax at 1979 revolution.

The tremendous oil income especially in seventies prompted Shah Pahlavi to make the Iranian army among the first five in the world and he also made plans for possessing nuclear energy. He signed agreements with European countries and with US for nuclear energy plantation projects.

American politicians and particularly Kennedy administration were anxious about Shah’s expenditure on arms which was far beyond the real needs of the country. President Kennedy insisted on social, economic and political reforms in favour of the public.

TURKISH-IRANIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE DRAWN ON KEY FINDINGS

The border between Turkey and Iran has been determined by the peace treaty signed on 17th May, 1639 after the Ottoman-Iranian war. The border is preserved without any interruption until present. The relations of two countries had been generally in friendly terms. During the Cold War it has been converted to alliance under the CENTO organization supported by US.

Turkey and Iran have been important actors in Middle East for many centuries. Both have searched for regional power and this has inevitably created an implicit competition. Turkish Republic was established as a secular state while Iran seemed to be core of Shia Moslems. The 1979 revolution drastically converted the authoritarian monarchy into a religious state. Turkish government immediately recognized the new regime but the ideology brought by the leaders of the revolution was in clear contradiction with Turkey's fundamental principle of a secular state. Despite this troublesome situation no serious decline in bilateral relations was observed.

An important population of Turkish descent lives in Iran, concentrated in Azerbaijan region. Iran has been sceptical of Turks and to some extent has viewed them as potential danger. In a similar manner the close bonds of the Iranian government with the Shia Muslims of Turkey annoyed Turkish governments. Religious and ethnic differences have not caused serious social unrest in either country. Additional conflict was separatist Kurdish movement which began as terrorist attacks in Southeast Turkey in 1984. In many instances terrorists were able to safely cross the Iranian border.

During the Iraq-Iranian war (1980-1988), Iraq was backed by Western Powers and Iran was isolated. Turkey kept same distance with the parts and maintained neutrality. Trade with Iran reached its climax which naturally contributed to good neighbourhood relations. The destructive economic effects of the war and basic daily needs of the people was partially compensated with Turkish imports.

CONCLUSION

It was a dilemma for many countries between staying neutral or choosing a side and militarily being involved in WW II. The dilemma continued after the war because of the new bipolar world political order. Turkey and Iran tried their best to stay neutral during WW II but they were in a way obliged to make a preference. Iran formally declared her neutrality but she could not stop British and Soviet occupation in 1941 which eventually put Iran on the side of allies. The motivation of Turkey and Iran to join the West stemmed mainly from Soviet threat. Russia's ambition of reaching the warm South seas dates to Tsarist rule. Control of Turkish straits or accessing Persian Gulf were the ways to reach this goal. Historical prejudices and actual threat of the communist regime was the primary reason for Turkey and Iran to join Western bloc. Soviets were more than military threat for Turkey and Iran. Establishment of Warsaw Pact enabled Russians to control nearly all East Europe. The interests of Soviets were not limited to Europe. Soviet expansion aimed propagation of communist ideology and practice wherever possible globally. The social, cultural and religious backgrounds of Turkey and Iran were absolutely in great contradiction with communism and this brought fear and the need to step aside on the anti-communist front. Security concerns played an important role in decision making and determining the priorities.

United States of America did not bear the prejudices and misconceptions of the European history and had no serious conflict of interests with Turkey and Iran. The US was most probably the only country capable of supplying security measures and financial support. Economic aid of US to Iran and Turkey was vital and it marked another factor which facilitated annexing them to West. During the years of Cold War and in early post war era Turkish leaders realized that infrastructure investments, sustainable economic growth and modernization of the army desperately needed foreign financial aid. The same thing was true for Iran. The Truman Doctrine and Marshall program intended economic reconstruction of Europe including Turkey and many other countries.

The last eleven years of Cold War is entirely a different chapter for Iran. The domestic social religious and cultural life along with international positions were drastically reversed. The analysis of this period is an interesting subject for further studies since the regime is still existing in Iran.

REFERENCES

1. Deringil, Selim, (1989), *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War*, New York Press, (Chapter 8, pp. 34-36).
2. Ghani, Cyrus, (1998), *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah*, London: IB Tauris Publishers, (Chapter 7, pp. 23-24).
3. Pollack, Michael, (2004), *The Persian Puzzle*, New York: The Random House Publishing Group, (Chapter 25, pp. 80-81).
4. Rehema, Ali, (2015), *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers and Spooks*, USA: Cambridge University Press, (Chapter 2, pp. 5).