



CHAPTER 14

**FOREIGN POLICY IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY:
AN EXISTENTIALIST PERSPECTIVE
ON POST-2016 TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY**

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Abstract

This paper develops an existentialist theoretical framework for the analysis of foreign policy and applies it to the analysis of post-2016 Turkish foreign policy. It starts from the premise that international relations is increasingly characterized by radical uncertainty, constituted by a greater awareness of unknown unknowns and their ever-present possibility of materializing. This intensifying uncertainty is activating existential anxieties on part of state actors about their future position, role, identity, and purpose in international politics. The IR literature is yet to identify the foreign policy manifestations of these anxieties. This paper makes a first step by focusing on the case of Türkiye. The paper employs discourse analysis to analyze the speeches of Turkish foreign ministers delivered at the annual Ambassador's conferences to show how these existential anxieties are experienced in the Turkish context and how the erratic directions that Turkish foreign policy has taken in the post-2016 period are justified.

Keywords

Existentialist Framework, Foreign Policy Analysis, Post-2010 Turkish Foreign Policy, Radical Uncertainty, Identity Crisis

Introduction

Various global developments in the past decade have brought about an increasingly shared sense that we are living through a distinct period of great uncertainty, unpredictability, unsettled times, or an age of anxiety (Rumelili, 2021; Steele 2021). Be they natural disasters of unforeseen proportions, like forest fires (Kwai, 2019) and earthquakes (Atalay, 2023), unanticipated political developments, such as Brexit and election of Trump (Lynch, 2018), socio-economic crises of increasing frequency (Beckett, 2019), global pandemic that brought the world to a halt (Robinson, 2020), the culmination of these developments, while individually not unique and totally unprecedented, appear to have altered our collective outlook toward the future. While such observations are routinely made, the state of the art in the discipline of international relations remains conceptually and theoretically unequipped to analyze whether and how this shared sense of radical uncertainty is affecting international relations. My recent research in IR theory derives select insights from existentialist thought to argue that radical uncertainty is distinct from the more routinized uncertainties of international relations and that it bears the potential to shape international agency in distinct ways (Rumelili, 2021; 2023). In this paper, I will also reflect on the implications of radical uncertainty for Turkish foreign policy. From existentialist thought, I, first of all, take the distinction between anxiety and fear. Briefly, according to the existentialist-theoretical understanding, anxiety is an internally experienced unease arising from awareness of mortality, radical uncertainty, and meaninglessness, and, as such, is distinct from fear, which is manifest in aversion and vigilance towards known objects of threat (Rumelili, 2020; 2022). Secondly, I build on the existentialist notion of mood to postulate anxiety as having become a prevalent systemic-affective condition which is constituted by and enabling a particular way of Being-in-the-World (Rumelili, 2021). Thirdly, building on the revelatory potential of anxiety as highlighted by existential thought (Rumelili, 2020; Berenskoetter, 2020), I argue that, at least among those attuned to the world in such a manner, the mood of anxiety is potentially activating more radically revisionist, ambitious, and risk-taking international behavior. Actors are envisioning a greater set of possible international orders, experiencing a high consciousness of choice and volition with respect to international outcomes, and an elevated sense of moral purpose and responsibility. For them, courage is becoming a political virtue and self-actualization a moral foreign policy objective. This leads to a radical and ambitious foreign policy that is often pursued despite its risks and ineffectiveness.

With respect to Turkish foreign policy, I argue that analyses need to take the systemic affective condition of anxiety into account in addition to the effects of domestic political factors and changing distribution of power in the international system. The existing literature underscores the volatile, erratic, and unpredictable course of post-2016 Turkish foreign policy (Cop & Zihnioglu, 2017; Kuşku-Sönmez, 2019; Taş, 2022; Adisonmez & Oztig, 2024). While it is certainly the case that the decline of Western dominance and transition to a multipolar distribution of power gives middle powers like Türkiye greater leeway to pursue independent foreign policies (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021), its precise effect depends on whether the changing distribution of power is apprehended in a mood of fear or anxiety. It is because Türkiye is attuned to the world in anxiety that Türkiye has been rapidly shifting foreign policy alignments and role definitions rather than positioning itself clearly in the emerging balances of power in the international system. Similarly, while radicalism is a characteristic of populist foreign policies in general (Taş, 2022; Wajner & Guirlando, 2024), domestic political factors are insufficient in explaining how certain foreign policy choices rather than others come to support populist governance at home. Again, I would argue that the attunement of the Turkish public and elite to the world in anxiety has mattered in generating a broader tolerance and support for volatility and rapid shifts in Turkish foreign policy.

In order to demonstrate how the mood of anxiety is shaping Turkish foreign policy, I have conducted a preliminary analysis of the speeches of Turkish Foreign Ministers delivered at the Annual Ambassadors' Conferences 2016 to 2023. I show that these speeches invariably follow a three-step narrative structure: The speeches start with casting the international environment as threatening and unpredictable to a previously unforeseen degree. Then they almost always point to historical examples where Türkiye has successfully weathered such challenges in the past. Following that, the speeches proceed with a long list of Turkish foreign policy actions in the past year. I argue that this particular narrative structure functions to first generate (or perpetuate) the attunement to the world in anxiety, then provide reassurance that history has equipped Türkiye to deal with any challenge and legitimize Türkiye's foreign policy actions of the past year as having prepared Türkiye to counter any unexpected challenge coming from the future.

As such a preliminary analysis is undoubtedly insufficient in demonstrating the distinct effect of the mood of anxiety on Turkish foreign policy, my goal in this article is to merely advance this as a proposition to be developed and empirically tested in future research. In the following section of the article, I start with discussing the difference between fear and anxiety and how repeated encounters with radical uncertainty facilitate a shift from a world that is apprehended within a mood of fear to one that is apprehended in a mood of anxiety. In the second section, I introduce the notion of mood as a systemic affective condition impacting international relations and disposing actors to be attuned to the world in particular moods rather than others. In the third section, I discuss the effect of moods on agency and how the mood of anxiety is leading states to be attuned to the world either in fear or in anxiety. Those that are attuned to the world in anxiety are disposed to pursue more radically revisionist and risk-taking foreign policies. Following this theoretical and conceptual discussion, in the fourth section of the article, I proceed with my analysis of the speeches of Turkish Foreign Ministers delivered at the Annual Ambassadors' Conferences. The conclusion summarizes the main propositions advanced in the article and suggests avenues for further research.

World of Fear versus World of Anxiety

International affairs is notoriously uncertain and unpredictable. According to Rathbun (2007, p. 533), uncertainty is 'arguably the most important factor in explaining the often-unique dynamics of international as opposed to domestic politics.' States are under significant uncertainty in the anarchical environment of international politics as a result of the unknowability of the intentions of other states and the ever-present possibility that those intentions may change. This is 'a world where states have the capacity to offend against each other', and 'no state can be certain that another state will not use its offensive capability first' (Mearsheimer, 1994, pp. 10-11). However, as recently highlighted by Katzenstein and Seybert (2018), this vast uncertainty that all theoretical perspectives in international relations take note of consists almost exclusively of known unknowns. It captures situations where actors confront known contingencies with unknowable or incalculable probabilities (Mitzen & Schweller, 2011) While it is impossible to assign a probability to a particular form of attack from a specific adversary, there are a known set of potential adversaries and a known set of ways of attack. Thus, while interstate behavior certainly presents a greater degree of uncertainty than situations where actors confront contingencies with knowable and calculable probabilities, i.e risks, it constitutes a bounded space of uncertainty for state actors, and one which can ultimately be managed by known measures, i.e military deterrence.

As I have recently argued, within this bounded space of uncertainty, the mood of fear prevails (Rumelili, 2023). Actors are preoccupied with the anticipation of possibilities, calculation of probabilities, causes of threat and harm, and the search for preventive and defensive measures. Regardless of the extent and degree of threat faced, the boundedness of this space of uncertainty constituted by known unknowns, is also critical to the maintenance of ontological security. Despite the many unknown unknowns of the human predicament, we do not live in continuous awareness. As Giddens (1991) has emphasized, from early childhood, we weave a protective cocoon of routines and narratives to brush aside existential questions, such as the nature of reality and the unknowability of the future. Inside this cocoon is the limited set of contingencies we actively anticipate and guard against. Encounters with adverse events included in this bounded space, as harmful as they may be, strengthen our trust in our mastery of the future.

In contrast, encounters with unexpected events that intrude into this bounded space generate existential doubt. Initially, we seek to situate new events that we encounter within this bounded space of uncertainty in a post-hoc fashion as much as possible; we cognize them as related to known contingencies that we have been aware of and anticipating. However, as the limits of this bounded space are stretched, a more fundamental uncertainty that is marked by the awareness that we are not aware of all possibilities and a collective feeling of not knowing the future inevitably arises. This is the world of anxiety, marked by a general apprehension about the future in the form of: "if this, what's next?" (Rumelili, 2023). Actors are disoriented and unsettled. Regardless of their ideological positioning, they have to anticipate and prepare for new contingencies and decide on how to be and act within a less definite range of possibilities.

Given the human tendency to situate the unanticipated within the realm of the anticipated, the transition from a world of fear to a world of anxiety is less likely to take place through a shock -the event is so unprecedented that it cannot be cognized as a known contingency, and more likely through the crossing of a tipping point following a drawn-out cumulative process, where ambiguous -partly anticipated, partly not- developments wear out the human capacity to situate in a post-hoc fashion the unanticipated within the realm of the anticipated. In a recent contribution (Rumelili, 2023), I have speculated that the COVID-19 crisis may as well be this tipping point. If a global pandemic brought the world to a halt, then what is next? Covid-19 was soon followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. If Russia could launch a full scale invasion of Ukraine, then what is next?

Following the crossing of this tipping point, a world of anxiety also possesses a self-perpetuating quality by shaping how subsequent developments are cognized by actors. It produces post-hoc cognitive assessments that the occurrence of a particular unanticipated event is proof that we are not aware of all possible contingencies, which in turn perpetuate the mood of anxiety.

Anxiety as a Mood

However, a world of anxiety is not a world where all actors are anxious rather than fearful to the same extent and in the same way. Rather, drawing on existentialist notion of mood, I conceptualize a world of anxiety as one where anxiety is the prevalent mood for actors' attunement to the world, which constitutes and disposes actors to collectively feel, think, and act in specific ways (Rumelili, 2021).

While emotions are individually held and shape an individual's relation to the world that exists independently of it, moods are social phenomena that arise out of 'Being-in-the-World' (Elpidorou & Freeman, 2015). According to Heidegger, we are mooded beings. Because we are mooded, the world is disclosed to us in ways that emotionally affect us. Moods thus are "comes neither from 'outside' nor from 'inside'", but nevertheless they are affective states that we find ourselves in because of our always remaining attuned to the world (Elpidorou & Freeman, 2015).

Moods therefore can be considered as systemic affective conditions in IR that emerge through actors' attunement to the world and in turn condition how actors are attuned to the world. Moods interact with other systemic conditions, such as the distribution of power and ideas. The transition to a multipolar world, by itself, may not always generate a large scale attunement to the world in anxiety. When there is greater certainty about the inevitability and direction of power transition, it may be apprehended largely within a mood of fear, leading actors to promptly form military and ideological alliances to clearly define their enemies and systems of meaning. In contrast, arguably, what we have today is a power transition that is apprehended within a mood of anxiety. It is characterized by a drawn-out uncertainty and ambiguity about whether and how we are in a multipolar world. Similarly, if the decline of the liberal international order is apprehended in a mood of fear, it would lead its advocates to fiercely combat its competitors. Instead, within a mood of anxiety, actors are witnessing an erosion of the liberal international order from within in the absence of a clear ideological alternative.

Under the systemic affective state of anxiety, not all actors will be attuned to the world in anxiety. In fact, as will be discussed below, the dominant tendency of evading anxiety through fear will be the case for most actors in most contexts. These actors will commit themselves to defining a clear threat object, elevating its significance, and focusing their energies almost exclusively on combatting it. However, as will be demonstrated with the case of Türkiye, the mood of anxiety also renders an alternative form of agency possible. Instead of seeking to evade anxiety, these will seek to promote and perpetuate it, by underscoring the world's complexity, ambiguity, and unknowability. They would even aggravate the uncertainty by their very own unpredictable behavior. Within this setting, they will envision a wide range of possibilities for the future of the international order and their role in it. Thus, they experience a high consciousness of choice and volition with respect to international outcomes, and an elevated sense of moral purpose and responsibility. Such attunement to the world in anxiety activates more radically revisionist, ambitious, and risk-taking international behavior, with the purported justification of shaping the future in order to control it.

The Mood of Anxiety and Foreign Policy

According to Ringmar (2017; 2018), moods exist independently of our consciousness and precede our interpretation; one is in a mood before being aware of it. However, the mood that we are in is reflected in our body language and general demeanor and thus often recognized by others. Moods affect and to an extent even determine how things appear to us, i.e. “coloring everything we see around us in a certain hue.” They govern the thoughts we possess and the actions we undertake without conscious reasoning, such as our intuitions and gut reactions. In case of more complex and reasoned actions, moods intervene in the process between our reasoning and narratives of our forthcoming actions and our actual bodily motions, e.g. getting out of bed after you have reasoned you must.

As I have discussed in my earlier work, the mood of anxiety activates two polarized agencies (Rumelili, 2021). Either it intensifies the dominant tendency to evade and disguise anxiety, by diverting it to threat objects or seeking reassurance in frameworks of certainty. Consequently, a politics of securitisation and nativist-authoritarian populism prevails. Actors exhibit intensified attachment to existing objects of fear and ideological frameworks or construct new ones. Minds are occupied more than ever with identification of threats and risk calculations and we are highly receptive to such information. Metaphors of war and enmity as well as clear-cut Manichean divisions of good and evil, of Self and Other have greater appeal. Actors subconsciously seek the comfort provided by home and therefore vehemently commit to protecting our nation and borders. They also seek out absolute truths that are premised on the nature and essence of things, and thus come to discredit experts who are only able to provide only probabilistic inferences.

On numerous occasions, the literature has alluded to the positive potential of anxiety in activating a transformative, radical, authentic, and possibly emancipatory agency (Rumelili, 2021; Ekhlund et al., 2017). Existentialists have lamented the human tendency for “fallenness”, the tendency for individuality and distinctiveness to get lost in the anonymity of everyday life through unquestioning obedience to societal expectations and beliefs. They have emphasized the revelatory potential of anxiety to expose this fallenness, paving for the realization of the human potential for authenticity and the freedom to attain one’s own most potentiality-for-Being (Berenskoetter, 2020; Rumelili, 2020). However, apart from some illustrative examples, the IR literature has fallen short of spelling out what that kind of agency would entail in terms of foreign policy. Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 971) associate authenticity primarily with the projective dimension of agency, which is “future-oriented and entails the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action. It becomes predominant when actors ‘care’ about the future and “project” themselves into their own possibilities of Being. Anxiety activates a transformative agency, with actors exhibiting high consciousness of choice and volition with respect to international outcomes, an elevated sense of moral purpose and responsibility, courage, and will to self-actualization.

Turkish Foreign Policy in the Mood of Anxiety

Much has been written about the change in Turkish foreign policy in the last two decades under the AKP governments led by President Erdoğan. Previous analyses focused on the question of whether there is an “axis shift”, whether Turkish foreign policy is shifting away from a pro-Western orientation as a NATO ally towards a neo-Ottomanist or pro-Russian orientation in pursuit of an independent regional power status (Oguzlu, 2008; Onis & Yilmaz, 2009). More recent analyses have, however, started to question whether there is a clear direction and purpose in Turkish foreign policy choices in the first place. Turkish foreign policy has started to be characterized as erratic, volatile, and disoriented (Karakoyunlu, 2021). While some have explained this volatility as evidence of ineptitude and mismanagement of Turkish foreign policy following Türkiye’s transition to a presidential regime in 2017, others have characterized it as the cumulative result of foreign policy actions undertaken to serve short-term populist governance objectives at home (Tas, 2022).

In a recent contribution, Adisonmez and Oztig (2024) have identified three symptoms of disorientation in Turkish foreign policy: First, Turkish foreign policy is disoriented in terms of holding soft power aspirations while relying on hard power instruments in the Middle East. In late 2000s, Türkiye first made a rapid transition from promoting economic interdependence and people-to-people links with

Syria and other authoritarian governments in the Middle East in pursuit of zero problems with neighbors towards flaunting itself as a model democracy to inspire the revolts against these very regimes. In 2010s, Türkiye abandoned its reliance on such soft power instruments to full-heartedly embrace hard power to realize forceful regime change. Secondly, Turkish foreign policy has shown signs of disorientation in its policy towards the EU. While indicating its full commitment to the pursuit of EU membership on numerous occasions, Türkiye has also insinuated that Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICs can be alternative platforms. Thirdly, Türkiye has shown significant indecision and confusion in choosing between the rival defense systems of NATO and Russia. Türkiye protested NATO member states' withdrawal of Patriot missiles from Türkiye by purchasing S-400 missiles from Russia. When the US retaliated by removing Türkiye from the F-35 program and granting security assistance to Greece and Cyprus, Türkiye chose not to activate the S-400 system at all.

I argue that the systemic affective context of anxiety and Türkiye's attunement to the world in anxiety also need to be taken into account in explaining this disorientation and volatility in Turkish foreign policy. As I have indicated previously, the systemic affective context of anxiety bears the potential to activate an alternative form of agency on part of actors that are also attuned to the world in anxiety. This is an international agency that is not only in pursuit of power, survival, national interest, or status, but also of some kind of self-actualization. These actors experience the world as radically uncertain, they also experience a high consciousness of choice and volition with respect to international outcomes, and they possess an inflated sense of agency and ambition to shape the future regardless of their capacity to do so. This sense of agency is to some extent politically produced, but only resonates because it reflects the attunement of the political actors and the public writ large. The foreign policies driven by this sense of agency are often ineffective, self-defeating and counter-productive, especially when they are not matched by capabilities; yet they are undertaken despite their observed failures.

In order to demonstrate the effect of the systemic affective context of anxiety on Turkish foreign policy, I have conducted a preliminary analysis of the speeches delivered by Turkish foreign ministers at the Ambassadors' Conferences since 2016. As analyzed in detail by Kuru (2019), these conferences, which gather a state's diplomatic representatives stationed abroad in their home country for an annual meeting, have been held in Türkiye regularly since 2008. France was the first country to organize such a gathering in 1993 and this diplomatic practice has since been adopted by several other countries including Türkiye. I assume that the speeches delivered by Turkish foreign ministers at these annual events provide a clear picture of how the international environment is perceived by the Turkish government and attempt to chart a common vision for Turkish foreign policy that would guide the ambassadors. Although these speeches are later published on the Turkish Foreign Ministry's website, their main addressee is the Turkish diplomatic corps rather than the Turkish public writ large.

Türkiye's first ambassador conference was organized in 2008, and Ali Babacan was the first Foreign Minister to address this inaugural event. Subsequently, the second conference was held in 2010 while Ahmet Davutoğlu was the foreign minister, and the conferences continued to be held on an annual basis thereafter (Kuru, 2019). While Davutoğlu is known for steering Turkish foreign policy in an ambitious and assertive direction, the narrative similarity in the speeches delivered during and beyond his tenure is indicative of a continuity in the way the international environment is perceived and how Türkiye's role in that environment is defined.

The speeches analyzed for this article were delivered by Mevlut Çavuşoğlu (2016-22) and Hakan Fidan (2023). As noted in the introduction, these speeches invariably follow a three-step narrative structure: They start with portraying the international environment as threatening and unpredictable to a previously unforeseen degree. Then they almost always point to historical examples where Türkiye has successfully weathered such challenges in the past. Following that, the speeches proceed with a long list of Turkish foreign policy actions in the past year.

The portrayals of the international environment as highly unstable and unpredictable produce and perpetuate an attunement to the world in anxiety. In all the speeches, the precarity of Türkiye's geopolitical location is underlined. In 2016, Çavuşoğlu (2016) noted that "the majority of global crises are occurring in the Eurasian region, where we are at the very center" and in 2017, urged

the ambassadors to “look at the developments taking place right next to us... Look at the challenges we are confronting at the same time...”. In addition, the observations that the world is on the throes of a momentous transformation are repeatedly conveyed. In 2016, Çavuşoğlu (2016) notes that “the geopolitical equations are being reshaped” in 2017, underscores that this is an epoch-changing transformation: “No matter how you define it, the global structure of the last 300 years in one sense and the last 70 years in another sense is changing” (Çavuşoğlu, 2017).

In 2019, the extent and depth of change in the international system is again emphasized and its impact on Türkiye is dramatized. Çavuşoğlu (2019) underscores that “we are in one of the most challenging periods in our Republican history in terms of the international environment” because change in the “regions around us and the global environment” is “tremendous”, “deep and permanent.” In 2022, the observation that the world is on “the eve of a new series of turmoil” is reiterated and the “period we are entering into” is characterized as “the Age of Depression” (Çavuşoğlu, 2022).

In addition to accentuating and dramatizing the extent of change, the Foreign Ministers’ speeches delivered at the Ambassadors’ Conferences also underscore the uncertainties regarding the direction of change. In 2017, it is underscored that “our world is going through a transition period that is yet to be fully named” (Çavuşoğlu, 2017). In 2019, it is reiterated that “uncertainty prevails everywhere” and “visibility is short” (Çavuşoğlu, 2019). In 2022, the world is characterized as “uneasy” and “searching for its balance” (Çavuşoğlu, 2022). It is also unprepared: “The world is entering this mess with its eyes closed” (Çavuşoğlu, 2022). In 2023, it is again reiterated that the international system is “increasingly moving away from balance”, which is bringing “many unexpected developments,” and “increasing fragility” (Fidan, 2023).

Following this portrayal of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the international context, it is interesting that the speeches abruptly adopt a positive tone that highlight the opportunities for Türkiye, instead of urging prudence and caution. In 2016, it is indicated that Türkiye should “make it a priority” to “influence the developments in a positive direction” (Çavuşoğlu, 2016). In 2019, Türkiye is praised for taking risks: “We set sail in a turbulent sea and made significant progress” (Çavuşoğlu, 2019). There is a tone of urgency in the speeches, which compel Türkiye to seize this moment of transformation to shape the international system according to its preferences. This urgency is most clearly communicated in the 2019 speech: “We have entered a period in which we need to emerge with new thoughts, new initiatives and new moves. In every sense, the next few years are of great importance” (Çavuşoğlu, 2019).

The speeches make ample historical references for reassurance and to bolster Türkiye’s ambition and confidence in positioning itself as an active player in the turbulent international environment. In 2017, history is first invoked to reassure the audience that Türkiye can deal with any challenge that may come its way: “These national values have not left our nation stateless or under the sovereignty of others for two thousand years.” The ambassadors are then urged to go beyond “defend[ing] the interests of our country, the expectations of our nation, and fly[ing] our flag with the crescent and the star proudly all over the world.” It is declared that: the accumulation of civilization we have and the strong legacy we received from our ancestors prevent us from being content with this. The children of the civilization, which has ended one era and heralded a new one, cannot be satisfied with this (Çavuşoğlu, 2017).

Leading this period of transformation in the international system is portrayed as a responsibility for Türkiye that is not only born out of its history but also of the expectations of others. In the 2017 speech, it is noted that Türkiye is “appreciated as a leading and active actor of the changing world order” and the ambassadors are urged to “represent not only the Republic of Türkiye, but also those who look at Türkiye with hope and do not forget Türkiye and the Turkish nation in their prayers” (Çavuşoğlu, 2017).

Following such reassurances, the speeches generally proceed with a list of Türkiye’s foreign policy actions in the past year. These actions and activities are discussed without any reference to their outcomes or efficacy and are often simply justified by the need to act. Perhaps, the clearest statement of this attitude can be found in the 2017 speech by Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu:

As Türkiye, we must be present in every possible frame of a global stage. We must be able to embrace Europe, Asia, Trans-Atlantic, Africa and Latin America. With this understanding, our President visited both Asia, East Africa, West Africa and Latin America in 2016. These visits will continue in the coming period. (Çavuşoğlu, 2017)

In 2020, Turkish foreign policy activism is justified by a saying of Ibn Arabi, famous 11-12th century Muslim philosopher: “Ibn Arabi said it beautifully: “The origin of existence is in movement” (Çavuşoğlu, 2020).

Acting is equated with control. In other words, it is assumed that because Türkiye is active on the world stage, it is able to control the future developments. As Çavuşoğlu (2019) states in the 2019 speech, “the risks and threats” make it “necessary to turn risks into opportunities.” In 2020, Çavuşoğlu declares that Turkish foreign policy is based on “getting the upper hand” rather than “burying [our] heads in the sand”. An “entrepreneurial” or “enterprising” foreign policy involves sometimes “setting up a game” and other times “disrupting the game” that is set by others (Çavuşoğlu 2020). In 2023, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan sets “the vision” of Turkish foreign policy as making “Türkiye one of the system-building actors in the Turkish century.” He confidently declares:

What shape the international system will take at this moment of rupture will depend on the policy preferences of the leading states and their ability to realize these preferences. Türkiye is undoubtedly one of these leading states under the leadership of our President. (Fidan, 2023)

What is lacking in these foreign policy speeches delivered at the annual Ambassadors’ conferences is any attempt to take stock of the failures of past foreign policy actions. The discrepancies and rapid shifts that have been observed in Turkish foreign policy during this period are neither recognized nor explained. Instead, without any basis, the 2022 speech declares that it has been a “Year of Validation in Turkish foreign policy. The accuracy of the findings we make at critical junctures and the policies we build upon them is becoming increasingly clear” (Çavuşoğlu 2022).

Conclusion

In this article, it was argued that international relations is increasingly being characterized by a sense of radical uncertainty, and this sense of radical uncertainty is shaping foreign policies of states also in ways that have not yet been theorized in the field of international relations. Drawing on existentialist thought, I argued that a sense of radical uncertainty arises when actors begin to apprehend unexpected, unanticipated developments within a mood of anxiety rather than a mood of fear. While the mood of fear orients actors to take defensive measures against all possible threats, the mood of anxiety is characterized by the awareness that one is not aware of all possibilities.

In line with existentialist thought, this article conceptualized anxiety not as a psychological attribute of states, but as a systemic affective condition of mood. Anxiety interacts with other factors of transformation in contemporary international relations, such as the distribution of power and the decay of the liberal international order. Like other systemic conditions, anxiety disposes states to act in certain ways rather than other but does not generate a uniformity in foreign policy.

The systemic affective context of anxiety was then suggested as a possible explanation of the volatility in Türkiye’s foreign policy in recent years. Through an analysis of foreign minister speeches at the annual Ambassadors’ conferences, it was demonstrated that Turkish foreign policy makers produce (and perpetuate) the systemic condition of anxiety by underscoring the radical uncertainties of the international system. Turkish foreign policy activism is then justified as attempts to shape the uncertain future in Türkiye’s interests.

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