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Turkey as a regional security actor in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Levant Region

This report analyzes Turkey's current foreign policy and its pronounced role as a regional security actor. It pinpoints deeper determinants and limitations of the policies that can be observed in different theatres of involvement. It identifies perceptions of policy makers and their political allies about Turkey's needs, goals, limitations, and national role conceptions as well as what drives decision makers in their choices. The report concludes with an overall framework for analysis in terms of Turkey as a regional security actor.

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INTRODUCTION

This report analyzes Turkey's role as a regional security actor in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Levant regions.¹

The research team's interdisciplinary background has guided the research, allowing a comprehensive assessment from a wide range of perspectives, as no single theoretical framework could holistically explain Turkey as a security actor. The overall framework used in this project mainly grounded in the neo/realist tradition of International Relations, but it also heavily benefits from various foreign policy analysis methodologies and a political psychology approach.

The original data used in this report was collected through closed online seminars with international and Turkish experts on different aspects of the project, online in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts and political elites from various political backgrounds, online free-flowed conversations with academics, experts, officials and advisors in Turkey and internationally. A comprehensive analysis of statements made by key political figures between January 1, 2015 and September 15, 2020 was also conducted.

During the project period, from July to December 2020, we have witnessed increased tensions in Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean, and the resumption of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The pace of unfolding security-threatening developments in Turkey's neighborhood is by no means extraordinary and indicates the complexity and the gravity of the issues the Turkish decision-makers have to deal with regularly in their near abroad.

Through this research, the team have identified key factors that guide the Turkish leadership in their strategic thinking concerning general foreign policy making and regional security issues. The research also reveals some of the long-term relational patterns between Turkey and its Western partners, and more recently with Russia. The report will reveal how Turkey is balancing its relations and policies between regions, between outside and inside actors, as well as between different actors to a varying impact in diverse theaters of operation.

In evaluating/mapping Turkey's national capacity to cope with all the issues arising in its neighborhood, the research has identified a set of key variables affecting country's defense/military capacity. As such, it has enabled us to sketch out a framework to understand the contours of Turkey's role conception as a regional security actor.

The report is structured in three parts. The first part addresses Turkey's historical and current strategic thinking and looks at the country's foreign and security policies from a conceptual perspective. The second part looks at Turkey's balancing acts between east and west, between Russia and its long-time allies, and among its regions. The third section assesses the balance between Turkey's capacity vs. ambition in projecting influence beyond its borders. The concluding section sketches out an overall framework for analysis in terms of Turkey as a regional security actor.

¹ This report is based on a research project funded through a grant to CMI from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

SECTION I: UNDERSTANDING TURKEY'S STRATEGIC THINKING

Whether consciously admitted or not, all countries follow long-term strategies, which are similar to highways, connecting one point in the past to a point in future passing through the present. As such, they politically and psychologically connect to an overall appreciation of a country including its history, cultural and ideological underpinnings, geographic realities, economic capabilities, future expectations, and understanding of its national interests as defined and constantly revived by its elites. These strategies provide a general framework and direction to the policy makers in their deliberations and daily actions.

It is common to come across public sentiments expressed in popular media and by political figures that “Turkey lacks a strategy” in its foreign policy.² In recent years, this has been coupled with statements emphasizing that Turkey’s foreign policy decision-making has become increasingly centralized, idiocentric and aligned with the whims of its decision makers. Similarly, at the international level, there is no clear agreement on whether or not Turkey has a coherent general strategy through which its leadership formulates various governmental policies and allocates the country’s resources.³

This lack of clarity about Turkey’s strategy is partly because Turkey does not have a tradition of publishing an official strategy or doctrine for its foreign and security policies, although various versions of the unpublished *National Security Policy Document* contain indications of an overall understanding of a strategy. Similarly, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Defense do not usually share their policy directions and overall policy frameworks. Nevertheless, when looking through several decades of policy behaviour, one can identify several patterns of conduct that are consistent over the years and have survived governmental changes. Codified as patterns of Turkey’s grand strategy,⁴ these “structural determinants” of Turkish foreign policy⁵ could guide us in our long-term search for a general framework explaining Turkey’s foreign and security behaviour in its neighborhood.

Some of these patterns are also observable behind the policy lines of the current Turkish leadership, although they are not often mentioned in public and some of the implementation practices have substantially differed from the pre-AKP era governments. It could be argued that the current

² For recent examples, see Cook, S.A. (2020). Erdogan is Libya’s man without a plan. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/09/erdogan-is-libyas-man-without-a-plan/>; Selcen, A. (2020). “Ankara’s foreign policy rationale”. Duvar English. <https://www.duvarenglish.com/ankaras-foreign-policy-rationale-article-55552>

³ Aydinli, E. (2020). “Neither Ideological nor Geopolitical: Turkey Needs a ‘Growth’-Based Grand Strategy”. *Perceptions*, 25 (2), Autumn/Winter: 227-252; Oğuzlu, T. (2021). “Grand strategy: Turkey as a resilient middle power”. Daily Sabah. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/grand-strategy-turkey-as-a-resilient-middle-power>.

⁴ Aydin, M. (2020a), “Grand Strategizing in and for Turkish Foreign Policy: Lessons Learned from History, Geography, and Practice”. *Perceptions*, 25 (2), Autumn/Winter: 203-226.

⁵ Originally defined by Aydin, M. (1999), “Determinants of Turkish foreign policy: historical framework and traditional inputs”. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35 (9): 152-186, this conceptualization was utilized in S. Naset, M. Aydin, M., Bilgin, H. Gürcan, A. M. Strand (2019). Turkish foreign policy: structures and decision-making processes. CMI Report. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6854-turkish-foreign-policy-structures-and-decision-making-processes> to situate current Turkish foreign policy making in a wider framework.

government is not willing to admit that publicly because they have been forced to follow similar strategic policies to its predecessors through the pressure of structural determinants (i.e., Turkey's geography, history, socio-cultural characteristics, and the impact of international system). The long-term patterns of Turkish foreign and security policies, which could be classified as linchpins of Turkish strategic thinking, are briefly explained below.

Key Determining Factors

Strategic Geographical Position

Although Turkey has undergone profound changes since the 1920s, the value of its geographical position has not significantly altered – even if its relative importance to other states has varied over time. Turkey's multidimensional geography has been used for political and economic benefit, but also represents a source of weakness when taking into account the number and combination of its neighbors. Some of the challenges resulting from Turkey's historical existence in this geography include: civil wars in Iraq and Syria, a divided Cyprus, dissonance with Armenians, and an inability to reconcile with the Kurds. The importance and value of the location is further highlighted by recent increased international attention towards several regional conflicts in Turkey's vicinity in recent decades. While the dramatic changes in the international system following the end of the Cold War and the contours of a changing world order had earlier challenged Turkey's traditional policy of isolating itself from regional politics, it also forced Turkey to add regional components to its foreign policy, necessitating a renewed emphasis on its multidimensional setting and its role in bridging different cultures and geographies. With this understanding of Turkey as a European, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern country, Turkey's political elites embraced its new positioning with multiple identities and historical assets. The reimagining of Turkey's geography and role should be one of the key elements in understanding its contemporary regional policies.

Impact of International System

Turkey is a country that is closely attuned to the changes in international system. While it was able to attain certain level of internal and external autonomy after its independence,⁶ the post-1945 bipolar international system forced Turkey to choose a side as “a policy of neutrality was not very realistic or possible for a country like Turkey, a middle-range power situated in such a geopolitically important area”.⁷ The Cold War, while encouraging Turkey's dependency on the West, also sustained unquestioning Western military, political, and economic support. As long as Turkey was threatened by the Soviet Union and the US was committed to assisting Turkey's economic development and defense, there was no reason to question Turkey's dependency on the West. However, the collapse of the USSR and the changing context from the 1990s has resulted in a reorientation of Turkish policy. In the 1990s, Turkey became a more assertive regional power, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. While during the Cold War, Turkey remained firmly within the Western bloc, since the end of the Cold War, its foreign relations have been dominated by a search for alternative connections.

Ten years after the end of the Cold War, the 9/11 attacks on the US and the Arab uprisings from 2011 onwards dramatically affected Turkish foreign policy. While Turkey benefitted from closer relations with the US in the immediate post-Cold War era, the US insistence to play a direct ordering role in Turkey's neighborhood in the post 9/11 era – in the Caucasus, the Black Sea, and especially the Levant – has led to diverging interests and security perceptions. This divergence further accentuated after the Arab uprisings.

⁶ For the concept of internal and external autonomy in Turkish foreign policy see Oran, B. (ed.), (2010). *Turkish foreign policy, 1919-2006*. Salt Lake City, Univ. of Utah Press: 15, Box: Intro 6.

⁷ Aron, R. (1973). *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*. New York, Anchor & Doubleday: 125-127.

Furthermore, the primacy of Western actors in international politics has come into question because of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the China's impressive economic growth. Other drivers challenging Western dominance include the rise of national populism, failure of Western migration policies, and Russia's resurgence.⁸ Turkey has adapted to changing circumstances in the international fora and has increasingly focused on its neighborhoods –the Balkans and the Black Sea in the 2000s, and the Middle East since early 2010s. While there were both security/strategic reasons and ideological/political choices for this change, the underlying change in the international system has also played an important determining role.

More recently, Turkey has had a window of opportunity to assert itself as a regional power due to these systemic changes, coupled with the partial withdrawal of the US from its international engagements around Turkey, Europe's struggle with resurgent Russia, and mixed outcomes of the Arab uprisings for regional geopolitics.

Ideational Inclinations of the Ruling Elite

In establishing the Turkish republic, the ruling elite carried out radical reforms to transform the country into a secular state and provided the basis of Western orientation, which became a key part of Turkish foreign policy during the 20th century.⁹ The Turkish elite's focus on the West was accentuated in the 1990s and 2000s with a full membership bid to the EU and the subsequent negotiations which helped Turkey's democratic transition and accelerated its international standing. The common understanding among Turkish elite at this time was that without its European connection, Turkey would be just another country in the Middle East. This belief paved the way for closer cooperation. However, the shared vision for Turkey's future among its political, economic, and bureaucratic elite soon withered away and Turkey began to move away from the EU and started looking for alternatives in its neighborhood. While Turkey's EU negotiations stalled as a result of a complex interaction of various political, cultural and economic developments both in the EU and in Turkey, Turkey's Western vocation was increasingly questioned from cultural, national and security perspectives.

The rise of new political elite with the Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) and the consolidation of its power in Turkish politics has also affected this change. Although exclusively pro-Western in its first term, a short review of the literature since 2007 when AKP started its second term in office, reveals that the new elite had solidified its approach to foreign policy with what was conventionally labeled as “the Turkish Model.” The Turkish model referred to the uniqueness of Turkey as a regional power and underlined its ideational role in Turkey's neighboring regions – especially in the Middle East. The Turkish model was supported by the country's proactive foreign policy and its use of “soft power” tools.¹⁰ In the words of the then-Chief Foreign Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey's new proactive foreign policy redefined it as a “provider of security and stability” in its neighborhood.¹¹ While the transformation of Turkish foreign policy away from its traditional model focusing on its Western connection towards a country with a role as regional security actor had started before AKP came to power,¹² from 2007 the AKP-related elite tilted the balance of Turkey's attention to its regions to the detriment of its internationally balanced position. Furthermore, the threats posed by the rising global security issues over the last couple of decades while Turkey's economic capabilities were concomitantly improving,

8 Oğuzlu, T. (2020). “Yeni Dünya Düzeni ve Türkiye: Nasıl Bir Dış Politika?” Panorama, 18 January, <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2020/01/18/yeni-dunya-duzeni-ve-turkiye-nasil-bir-dis-politika/>.

9 Sander, O. (1984). “Turkish Foreign Policy; Forces of Continuity and of Change”. In A. Evin (ed.), *Modern Turkey; Continuity and Change*. Opladen, Leske Verlag: 115-130.

10 Altunışık, M. B. (2005). “The Turkish Model and Democratization in the Middle East”. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 27 (1/2): 45-63; Fotiou, E. and D. Triantaphyllou (2010). “Assessing Turkey's ‘Soft Power’ Role: Rhetoric versus Practice”. *The International Spectator*, 45 (1): 99-113.

11 Davutoğlu, A. (2008). “Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007”. *Insight Turkey*, 10 (1): 77-96.

12 Aydın, M. (2005). *Turkish Foreign Policy; Framework and Analysis*. Ankara, Strategic Research Center.

enabled Turkey to position itself as a regional security actor.¹³ The policy proved to be successful and further intensified the willingness of Turkey's new elite to pursue even more assertive policy in its neighborhoods – especially in the Middle East.¹⁴

Goals Hierarchy and Policy Drivers

Any country's foreign policy goals are usually derived from the country's overarching national interests and general strategy. In the Turkish case, many analysts have attempted to identify and explain the rationale behind Turkey's recent foreign policy activism, often by relying on some specific variable such as Islamist ideology,¹⁵ the electoral alliance between the AKP and the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – MHP)¹⁶ or past injustices as perceived by the current leadership.¹⁷

Through our research and interviews and conversations with political elite and experts close to the foreign policy decision-making units, we have pursued a bottom-up approach to identify these goals, coming up with an aggregate goals hierarchy pursued by the Turkish leaders in foreign policy arena. They are:

- Attaining strategic autonomy with a capability to maintain the country's survival on its own, which involves having a flexible orientation in foreign policy, not compromising on perceived national interests and the essential issues for Turkey's survival, security, and strategy, while at the same time not alienating possible or potential allies, as well as ensuring the continuation of foreign investments.
- Forging new partnerships while maintaining traditional alliances, together with a policy of strategic balancing to reduce Turkey's over-dependence on its allies and to avoid direct confrontation with Russia.
- Becoming an exceptional country in its region to achieve material and political regional supremacy and respect, which would necessitate strengthening the military, expanding its footprint abroad with cross-border operations and/or military bases, and increasing its independence through

¹³ Bayer, R. and E. F. Keyman (2012). "Turkey: An Emerging Hub of Globalization and Internationalist Humanitarian Actor?" *Globalizations*, 9 (1): 73–90; Erickson, E. J. (2004). "Turkey as Regional Hegemon: Strategic Implications for the United States". *Turkish Studies*, 5 (3): 25–45; Barrinha, A. (2014). "The Ambitious Insulator: Revisiting Turkey's Position in Regional Security Complex Theory." *Mediterranean Politics*, 19 (2): 165–82; Martin, L. G. (2009). "Turkey as a Trans-Regional Actor." *Turkish Studies* 10 (1): 3–6; Özkan, M. and S. Orakçı (2015). "Viewpoint: Turkey as a 'Political' Actor in Africa – an Assessment of Turkish Involvement in Somalia." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9 (2): 343–52; Parlar Dal, E. (2016). "Conceptualizing and Testing the 'Emerging Regional Power' of Turkey in the Shifting International Order." *Third World Quarterly* 37 (8): 1425–53; Öniş, Z. and M. Kutlay (2017). "The Dynamics of Emerging Middle Power Influence in Regional and Global Governance: The Paradoxical Case of Turkey." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71 (2): 164–83.

¹⁴ Ayata, B. (2015). "Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing Arab World: Rise and Fall of Regional Actor?" *Journal of European Integration* 37 (1): 95–112; Güney, A. and H. D. Bilgin (2014). "Model Countries in Political Analysis: Is Turkey a Model for State Building in the Arab World?" *Jean Monnet Occasional Paper* No:10; Taşpınar, O. (2012). "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. December 6, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2008/10/07/turkey-s-middle-east-polic%20%20es-between-neo-ottomanism-and-kemalism/39k>; Taşpınar, O. (2014). "The End of the Turkish Model." *Survival* 56 (2): 49–64; Parlar Dal, E. and E. Erşen (2014). "Reassessing the 'Turkish Model' in the Post-Cold War Era: A Role Theory Perspective." *Turkish Studies* 15 (2): 258–82; Aydın, M. (2009). "Geographical Blessing versus Geopolitical Curse: Great Power Security Agendas for the Black Sea Region and a Turkish Alternative." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9 (3): 271–85; Celikpala, M. (2010). "Escalating Rivalries and Diverging Interests: Prospects for Stability and Security in the Black Sea Region." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 10 (3): 287–302; Aydın, M. (2014). "Turkish Policy towards the Wider Black Sea and the EU Connection." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 16 (3): 383–97.

¹⁵ Ozkan, B. (2014). "Turkey, Davutoglu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism". *Survival*, 56 (4): 119–140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.941570>.

¹⁶ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/29/the-myth-of-erdogans-power/>

¹⁷ <https://www.gmfus.org/events/turkeys-foreign-policy-conversation-ibrahim-kalin>

development of domestic military industry and acquisition of much-needed weapons systems (such as S-400s) to defend itself alone.

Through this analysis of these prioritized goals, we can see that attaining strategic autonomy for the country in its foreign and domestic politics, often linked to Turkey's survival in rhetoric, ranks at the top. Although the pursuit of autonomy in foreign policy began after the end of the Cold War and was further developed during the Davutoğlu era, it was significantly reinforced by the approach taken by the US and Europe in the aftermath of the attempted coup in 2016.¹⁸ The other goals, although important in their own right, are seen as sub-goals that enable Turkey to achieve this strategic autonomy. The concept of autonomy here should be read being independent of foreign pressures in its policy making. It also includes the wish of Turkey's political elites to have further flexibility in policy making regarding its commitments to the Western institutions. In other words, regardless of its membership to the Western institutions, Turkey's political elites want to act in line with the West when it suits its interests and act with non-Western partners or independently, whichever best suits its national interests, without feeling undue constraints from formal alliances and partnerships.

Our project also addressed the main drivers behind the above-mentioned foreign policy goals of contemporary Turkish leaders, as a full understanding of any country's foreign policy can only come when the motivation behind goals and policy lines is understood. The drivers here are understood as the activating issues, situations and perceptions that motivate the Turkish leadership to act towards fulfilling their chosen goals and national role conceptions. The following sections; *Siege Mentality and the General Feeling of Insecurity*, *Domestic Power Consolidation*, and *Maintaining/Increasing Capabilities through Development*, though not an exhaustive list, summarizes the most commonly considered drivers for Turkey's recent activism in its foreign policy.

Siege Mentality and the General Feeling of Insecurity

Turkey has been a security-minded state since its inception with international security concerns at the top of the agenda. This securitized tradition emphasizes the protection of territorial integrity, political independence and non-intervention in regional conflicts. Although the principle of non-intervention in regional conflicts has been eschewed since the end of the Cold War, the "security first" principle –which is closely tied to sovereignty– continues to shape Turkish strategic thinking. While the Turkish approach to security has traditionally been nationalist and NATO-centric, in recent years, it has shifted to highlight its autonomy in its neighborhood and defend its national interests more closely. This prioritization of security is not only seen in the decision-makers level, but is also reflected in public opinion (see Figure 1), which continually highlights the widespread threats it perceives from all quarters.

¹⁸ Falk, R. (2018). "Through a Glass Darkly: The Past, Present, and Future of Turkish Foreign Policy". In: Parlak Dal, E. (eds), *Middle Powers in Global Governance*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.: 33-51.

FIGURE 1: DO YOU THINK FOLLOWING COUNTRIES THREATEN TURKEY?

COUNTRY	YES	NO	I DON'T KNOW
USA	70,0	16,6	13,4
ISRAEL	66,7	17,5	15,8
SYRIA	65,4	19,3	15,3
IRAN	59,0	22,0	19,0
GREECE	58,9	23,0	18,1
ARMENIA	58,6	22,5	18,9
IRAQ	56,5	24,8	18,7
RUSSIA	55,0	26,6	18,4
UK	54,7	26,6	18,7
FRANCE	53,8	27,9	18,3
GERMANY	48,7	32,8	18,5

Source: Aydın, M., et al. (2020). *Quantitative Research Report on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy - 2020*. İstanbul, Kadir Has University and Akademetre, 17 June.

It is frequently argued that Turkey still suffers from a “Sèvres syndrome” – fear of dismemberment through foreign intrigues and interventions.¹⁹ This fear for country’s survival has been exacerbated in recent years with the internationalization of the Kurdish issue, especially in connection with its borders with Syria and Iraq where international terror groups can move across mountainous areas. As such, Turkey’s recent military operations in Syria, while countering the threat perceived from these regions beyond the Turkish border, also allows Turkey to maintain and control a security or a buffer zone to prevent border crossings.

Another aspect of the “siege mentality” and the “general feeling of insecurity” is the perception of loneliness, augmented by a reality that Turkey has few allies in a very complex and conflict-ridden neighborhood. This feeling is enhanced by a belief that its allies, such as European countries and the US, “are not always acting in tandem with Turkey on economic, political, or security issues”.²⁰ The feeling of betrayal by the allies (re)surfaced due to the US’s close cooperation with the Democratic Union Party of Syria (PYD) and its military wing – the People’s Protection Unit (YPG), which are affiliated with the PKK. However, this dissonance between the threat perceptions of Turkey and its allies is not only due to the actions taken (or to be specific “not taken”) by its Western allies in Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean, but also exacerbated by the Western (in)action in the aftermath of the coup d’état attempt in July 2016.²¹

The Kurdish issue has been a driving force for Turkish politics on multiple levels: in defining the nature of the domestic political alliances, reconfiguring Turkey’s regional aspirations, defining its approach to other regional countries, and limiting relations with its international partners. Indeed, the Kurdish issue has frequently been described as one of the “major determinants of domestic political consolidation” among the military, the bureaucracy, and the political establishment.²²

¹⁹ Drakoularakos, S. (2020). “Turkey and Erdoğan’s rising “Lausanne Syndrome.” *Digest of Middle East Studies*. doi:10.1111/dome.12224; Tharoor, I. (2020). “A century-old treaty haunts the Mediterranean.” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/08/10/treaty-sevres-erdogan-turkey/>.

²⁰ Online interview with an academic working at a think tank close to the AKP, September 2020.

²¹ Online interview with a conservative Turkish expert working for international think-tanks, September 2020.

²² All experts and political elites that were interviewed listed, when asked, the “Kurdish issue” amongst their top three drivers for Turkish foreign policy.

Recent external threat perceptions also include developments from 2019 in the Eastern Mediterranean, where, feeling encircled by several countries, Turkey hastily designed a combination of diplomatic and military responses which drew the country into the Libyan Civil War and resulted in a clash with Greece in the Mediterranean and Aegean.

Internal threat perceptions have been successfully externalized with continuing internal and cross border operations against the PKK and the Fethullah Gülen affiliated persons and groups. In fact, after the failed coup attempt in 2016, large parts of Turkey's foreign and security policies have been geared towards dealing with domestic and external factions of what is now called *Fethullah Gülen Terror Organization* (FETÖ) and the growing autonomy of the Kurdish groups in Northeastern Syria that is supported and protected by the US. At the same time, the government's attempts to build civilian oversight and monitoring mechanisms over the military from early 2000s onwards was first aided by the EU integration processes, which the government frequently used as justification for its reforms and crack downs on Ankara's bureaucratic tutelage regime. Later on, the process intensified with the implementation of the Presidential system and an even tighter grip of the political (civil) control over the military with the cooption of former Chief of General Staff, General Hulusi Akar, as the new all-powerful Minister of Defence.

The fear of dismemberment and loss of territory continues to hound Turkish national security thinking. As President Erdoğan declared in his Victory Day speech on August 29, 2019, "Turkey pursues [the] same determination to protect its national survival as it did 97 years ago".²³ Hence, the shadow of the Sèvres Syndrome continues to impact both Turkish public opinion and the political elite. The primary concern of Turkish political elites and the top decision-makers seem to be keeping the state as a "stable territory surrounded by a volatile milieu". To achieve this, Turkey has recently moved from a defensive position to a more offensive one. As such, recent changes in positioning in Iraq, Syria, and the Eastern Mediterranean have forced Turkey to re-think its national security architecture and foreign policy and security strategies. In response to recent regional geopolitical changes, President Erdoğan stated in January 2020 that "Turkey will continue to vigorously defend its rights and interests abroad. The country's future and security begin far beyond its borders".²⁴ Similarly, the decision to send troops to Libya was presented in Turkey as a "rejection of claims against Turkey's interests" and attempts to force Turkey to submit international forces that conspire against Turkish interests. This is in contrast to how it was framed from abroad as Turkey "flexing its muscles" and attempting "to become a power broker in a volatile region".

According to Erdoğan Turkey has risen under his administration to a position where its voice is heard on every regional and global issue. As a result, unnamed "international powers" are continuously presented to the public as trying to undermine Turkish power to prevent it from becoming an influential country "again" with power to shape the world. Thus, Turkey today wages "a struggle against those who seek to -yet again- condemn Turkey to modern-day capitulations."

Domestic Power Consolidation

Another important driver behind Turkey's foreign policy activism in recent years has been the electoral alliance created between the AKP and MHP, as well as nationalists and Eurasianist groups within the state apparatus in general. The alliance clearly drives current Turkish policies in Iraq and Syria, and is increasingly affecting various foreign policy issues, especially in relation to Turkey's Western alliance and the Kurdish question. Turkey's Syria policies have become increasingly tangled with domestic political developments and the AKP's need for domestic support to stay in power.

Many surveys have already shown that in the long-term foreign policy actions do not garner more votes for the government. However, in the case of, for example, Turkey's cross-border military operations, the

²³ <https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/109410/message-on-august-30-victory-day>

²⁴ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkeys-security-begins-far-beyond-borders-erdogan/1697901>

stimulated issue-based support due to “rally around the flag” concept²⁵ can be seen at two levels: a) It works in reality as a short-term “rally around the leader” effect. Hence the expectation among the government circles that, should the public support for the leader increases in the short term, this could be translated into a long-term voting intention if sustained with similar policies down the line; and b) In almost all cases in Turkey, the public exhibits increased support for the nation and troops while an operation is taking place, which creates a vicious circle of operations after operations in an attempt to keep the support up. Although this does not necessarily translate into a long-term voting behavior, it could be kept alive if the sentiments could be sustained through series of such interventions abroad. Hence, many analysts argue that the government continues to create foreign policy situations where military force or coercive means can be used repeatedly.²⁶

For example, several public polls conducted by the *Metropoll Polling* after the four operations in Syria showed that these cross-border operations garnered around 70% overall support.²⁷ However, the same poll also showed that this support came as the second version of the “rally around the flag” concept, and the overall support did not transform into the “rally around the leader” model – and did not translate into votes.

In the structured webinars organized for this project, experts argued that the public support for the operations in Syria came from a clearer understanding of the threat.²⁸ However, looking at the Eastern Mediterranean, different results appear – a September 2020 poll shows that only 23% of the population supported military solutions while 75% preferred non-military policy options.²⁹ Thus, although the government’s rhetoric feeds the nationalistic sentiments of the population, without an accepted enemy image or a clear threat perception, the majority of the population is against military escalations.

Figures 2-5 show that military presence abroad (bases, other installations and Turkey’s cross-border operations against terrorist groups) garner higher support among the voter base of the MHP – even more than AKP constituency. This extends the government’s activist – i.e. use of threats and force – foreign policy that we have seen in recent years.

FIGURE 2: SUPPORT FOR MILITARY PRESENCE ABROAD

Do you support Turkey’s military presence and/or establishing military bases abroad?

YES	NO	NO OPINION
36,8	35,6	27,6

Source: Aydin, M. et al. (2020), *Quantitative Research Report on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy – 2020*. İstanbul, Kadir Has University & Akademetre, 17 June.

²⁵ For discussions on the phenomenon see Baum, M. A. (2002). “The constituent foundations of the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon”. *International Studies Quarterly*, 46 (2): 263-298.

²⁶ See for example: Bremmer, I. (2021). How Erdogan’s increasingly erratic rule in Turkey presents a risk to the world. Time, <https://time.com/5943435/turkey-erdogan-increasingly-autocratic/>; N.a. (2020). Turkey’s increasingly assertive foreign policy. *Strategic Comments*, 26(6), iv–vi. doi:10.1080/13567888.2020.1830557; Online interview with an Istanbul based liberal Turkish expert within think-tank community, August 2020.

²⁷ See *Zeitgeist Turkey | Episode 18: Does conflict-oriented foreign policy rally votes for Ankara?*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/podcast/2020/10/22/zeitgeist-turkey-episode-18-does-conflict-oriented-foreign-policy-rally-votes-for-ankara/>. In the podcast the co-host Can Selçuki, who presents the numbers, do not specify the exact dates of the different polls.

²⁸ “Turkey as a Regional Security Actor” on September 21, 2020. The webinar was organized by the Project Team online to discuss relevant issues with experts of Turkish foreign an security policies based on a pre-structured discussion themes. It was not recorded and conducted on the basis of “Chattam House Rules”.

²⁹ *Zeitgeist Turkey | Episode 18*.

FIGURE 3: SUPPORT FOR MILITARY PRESENCE ABROAD BY PARTY AFFILIATION

PARTY	YES	NO	NO IDEA
AKP	51,1	19,8	29,1
CHP	19,9	54,1	26,0
MHP	60,4	17,7	21,9
HDP	6,0	66,0	28,0
IYIP	28,2	45,9	25,9

Source: Aydin, M. et al. (2020), *Quantitative Research Report on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy – 2020*. İstanbul, Kadir Has University & Akademetre, 17 June.

FIGURE 4: SUPPORT FOR CROSS BORDER OPERATIONS

In general, do you support Turkey's cross-border operations?

YES	NO	NO OPINION
41,2	35,8	23,0

Source: Aydin, M. et al. (2020), *Quantitative Research Report on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy – 2020*. İstanbul, Kadir Has University & Akademetre, 17 June.

FIGURE 5: SUPPORT FOR CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS BY PARTY AFFILIATION

PARTY	YES	NO	NO IDEA
AKP	54,1	22,6	23,4
CHP	29,1	47,4	23,5
MHP	57,3	22,9	19,8
HDP	13,0	66,0	21,0
IYIP	31,8	43,5	24,7

Source: Aydin, M. et al. (2020), *Quantitative Research Report on Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy – 2020*. İstanbul, Kadir Has University & Akademetre, 17 June.

Some of our interviewees argued that President Erdoğan pursues various foreign policy actions in order to increase his hold on power. Others argued that policy making is driven by “whatever works to raise the popularity of the government at home, regardless of the long-term consequences”.³⁰ In the context of the poll results in figures 2–5, the popularity hike is pursued to a temporary effect and does not seem to translate into actual votes in the longer term. As such, foreign policy, seen to underpin President Erdoğan’s domestic political trajectories and his strategy to hold the current coalition together, reflects a highly nationalistic approach. On the other hand, some argue that Turkey’s geopolitical reach and wish to dominate its neighborhood has overcome the political divide, meaning

³⁰ Online interview with a conservative Turkish expert within the international think-tank community, September 2020.

that a change of government would only make a small difference in terms of Turkey's challenges and its responses to them.³¹ However, we need to underline the fact that foreign policy plays a key role in holding together the domestic political coalition that AKP has established with the MHP.

Maintaining/Increasing Capabilities through Development

From the early days of the republic, increasing the nation's wealth and industrial development has been seen as both a way to increase the welfare of its citizens and also to extend the country's power base. It has also had an international component due to country's chosen manner of development. Thus, by the end of the Second World War, Turkey favored closer relations with the West – both because of security concerns, and also through a realization that the country needed extensive economic support to stimulate the economy after years of austerity. In the post-war period, the US was the only country with the capacity to expand economic aid to Turkey, a fact that was clear through Turkey signing agreements with the US that, in terms of security, were based on the Truman Doctrine and economically on the Marshall Plan. It is important to note that Turkey joined the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OECD's predecessor) in 1948, four years before joining NATO. Since then, Turkey-US relations have always had the two pillars of economy and security, which were finally linked with the signing of Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement (DECA) in March 1980. This agreement allowed US access to 26 military facilities in Turkey in return for an extensive military and economic aid package.³²

In the 1980s, as the demands from the growing Turkish population and dysfunctional Turkish economy forced Turkey to open up and integrate with the global economy, Turkey's Western connection was again strengthened. It also led to the unprecedented move by the then President Özal to articulate his "Economy First" principle, putting it briefly ahead of security and foreign policies. Similarly, Turkey's opening to its neighboring regions in the 1990s and 2000s related to the needs of a growing economy, demands of the middle classes, and aspirations of a young and increasingly educated population. These aspects of Turkey's international connections do not simply derive from the preferences of the ruling classes or the wishes of a leader, but reflect a long-standing structural imperative that is not easily alleviated by choices or preferences of different governments or decision makers.

Thus, to achieve Turkey's long-term domestic goal of a sustained economic growth becomes an important imperative behind pursuing a foreign policy that does not alienate potential investors and the country's trade partners. More recently, Turkey's attempts to diversify its external trade base by extending to the Middle East and Africa also clearly relates to this, and connects to Turkey's earlier active involvement in solving regional problems in 2000s.

However, the more interventionist policy of 2010s has negatively affected this foreign policy-economic development connection. As such, much recent developments indicate that the government sometimes tries to resolve the downturn in foreign direct investments by promising reforms and indicating new foreign policy that align closer with Turkey's Western partners. These same considerations could be motivating the recent promises of economic, political and judicial reforms and the human rights action plan. President Erdoğan's statement, after years of dissonance with the EU, that "We see ourselves in Europe, not anywhere else. We look to build our future with Europe" also demonstrates this.³³ This sudden turn can be read in light of Turkey's increased economic problems following the two sharp contractions in two years and the dire need for foreign direct investment.

³¹ This argument is most frequently stated in relation to the EastMed issue(s) as was the case in our webinar; "Turkey in the Mediterranean" on October 12, 2020. The webinar was organized by the Project Team online to discuss relevant issues with experts of Turkish foreign security policies based on a pre-structured discussion themes. It was not recorded and conducted on the basis of "Chattam House Rules".

³² See Uzel, İ. (2010). "Relations with the USA and NATO, 1960-1980". In: Oran (ed.), *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1919-2006*: 428-430.

³³ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-to-build-its-future-with-europe-Erdogan-says>.

According to Kouamé and Rab, Turkey needs to “refocus attention on structural reforms and build back a resilient economic system that propels it into the high-income group of nations”,³⁴ which should be seen in connection with the national role conceptions of the current ruling elite that sees Turkey among the more influential global countries and also with the domestic power consolidation wishes of the government.

Finally, economic development links directly with the development of indigenous military industrial complex, which is seen absolutely necessary if Turkey is to achieve autonomy in its foreign and security policies. The development of a local defense industry is clearly linked to the improvement in military capacity which then motivates more adventurous foreign policy initiatives in challenging the status quo in Turkey’s neighborhood, such as in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus.

Contemporary National Role Conceptions

Studies that examine the national role conceptions of Turkey detect several alternative roles for Turkey.³⁵ Turkey’s previous national role conceptions include Turkey as a “bridge between continents”, “gateway of civilizations”, “model country” and “active independent country”.³⁶ Further, there is a widely shared understanding of Turkey’s role that conceptualizes the country as a significant actor in all its regions – diplomatically, militarily, politically, and culturally. The current government has used this perception to steer Turkey towards activism in foreign policy in its neighborhood. Through our analysis, we found two current (additional) role conceptions: “Order Builder in the Neighborhood” and “Dynamic Regional Key Country.” Through our research and interviews we have identified some of the role-specific responsibilities/targets that the current Turkish leadership ascribe to:

- Countering Russia in the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Levant region
- Fighting radical extremist groups in the Middle East and North Africa
- Balancing Iran’s influence in Syria and Iraq
- Balancing US support for the PKK in the Middle East in general and in Northeast Syria in particular
- Balancing Russian and China’s influences in Central Asia, especially with regards to Turkic states
- Filling the gap created by the withdrawal of the US from, and the end of the attractiveness of the EU, in Turkey’s neighborhood
- Opposing other regional countries (such as the UAE, Iran, and Saudi Arabia) filling the above-mentioned space.

From the above list it can be established that: (1) both the practice of balancing and the role as a balancer is seen as important; (2) the Turkish leadership has an opportunistic outlook to increasing its regional influence that can be achieved through active engagement, and; (3) Turkey views itself as a responsible actor – THE actor –who, on behalf of the Western block, counters Russia and fights terrorism in its neighborhood, while at the same time countering “imperialist” tendencies of other states in Africa.

³⁴ Kouamé, A. T. and H. Rab (2020). “Turkey’s economic recovery from COVID-19: Preparing for the long haul”. *Brookings, Future Development*, November 17, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/11/17/turkeys-economic-recovery-from-covid-19-preparing-for-the-long-haul/>

³⁵ National role conceptions is the way leaders perceive the position of both their own states and other states. See Holsti, K. J. (1970). “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy.” *International Studies Quarterly* 14 (3): 233–309. They are not just determined by leaders themselves, but also affected by the events that happen in the international relations between specific states. See Walker, S. J. (1987). “Role theory and Origins of Foreign Policy”. In: C. F. Hermann, C. Kegley and J. Rosenau (eds.), *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy*. London, Harper Collins: 269-284.

³⁶ For a more in-depth study on national role conceptions of Turkish leaders, see Ö. Özdamar, B. T. Halistoprak and İ. E. Sula (2014). “From Good Neighbor to Model: Turkey’s Changing Roles in the Middle East in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring”. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 11 (42): 93-113.

These role perceptions go hand in hand with specific action-prescriptions. One interviewee argued that Turkey cannot solely rely on diplomacy to execute these role-specific targets and thus needs a significant military presence in these areas.³⁷ The policy-making elites also underline that Turkey needs to actively use its intelligence apparatus to support its engagements in these regions. Turkey would thus be the regional power asserting itself as one of the primary actors that defines the outcome of major regional crises.³⁸ Some of our interviewees also argued that Turkey has already been an important player in the regions that it is actively engaged today, and this connection shapes the way it acts. Some argued that the “Western countries are imperialist, their presence is foreign and therefore unsuccessful”, while Turkey’s presence is “non-imperialist, local and more natural”. Further arguing that, because of its Ottoman Empire history, Turkey has more links to the peoples of these regions.

Others, however, argued that Turkey can still be seen as a foreign actor and an imperialist country, and that Turkey’s motivations are not much different than those of European countries. They recognize that, while the government might be motivated by justice and a need to help dispossessed peoples, Turkey’s leadership is also motivated by power, prestige, importance and a desire to rule over others – these motivations are not so different from other powers.³⁹ We should note that these role perceptions are significantly shaped by the political polarization in Turkey. While the pro-government elites in Turkey see Turkey’s role as order-setting, the oppositional elites criticize this perception as being both imperialist and aggressive.

Regional Security Actor

There is a widespread perception amid the foreign policy community close to the government that “Turkey is an important regional security actor within its neighborhood”.⁴⁰ This perception is somewhat based on a misleading understanding of the “regional security actor” concept. The pro-government pundits continuously use the concept to refer to Turkey having the power to decisively influence the security environment in its neighborhood. In theory, however, the concept is neutral and refers to any state whose actions and motivations in international security are heavily regional, as opposed to interregional or global security actors. In theory, all security concerns are primarily generated in the immediate neighborhood of any given security actor.⁴¹ Yet the influence and capacities of these actors significantly differ.

Turkey has always been an important actor in its neighborhood and Turkey’s influence and footprint within regional security is significant – whether positive or negative. However, some of our interviewees argue that Turkey has recently shifted from being a “security provider” to being a “security actor.” In their framework, this shift refers to the fact that Turkey now defines the security scene around itself and its ability to affect the regional power balances. For example, they argue, Turkey previously contributed to the security of the Black Sea region “through the OSCE in times when the region witnessed destabilization” because of terrorism and refugees. Likewise, Turkey provided security to Europe by “acting as a security-wall between unstable regions and Europe” and through its NATO membership, “stood against Russia in the Southern Flank”. However, others suggested that Turkey had not been an autonomous actor and its importance and role in the geopolitics of its neighborhood before the AKP was conditioned by its connections with its Western partners. With the

³⁷ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020.

³⁸ This and following quotations from online interviews with policy advisors and experts that holds views aligned with the President. August-November, 2020.

³⁹ This view was frequently expressed during interviews with experts in opposition to the current government, though few of policy advisors and experts that holds views aligned with the President also expressed such arguments. Online interviews, August-November 2020.

⁴⁰ This section includes analysis of the responses from online interviews in August-November 2020 to the questions, “Would you think it is accurate to describe Turkey as a ‘regional security actor?’” and “If so, how did Turkey become such an actor?”

⁴¹ For details of the regional security complex theory, see B. Buzan and O. Weaver (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Society*. Cambridge, UK, The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

AKP's rise to power, according to this pro-government interviewees, Turkey has become a "regional security actor" with an increased strategic autonomy.

According to our pro-government interviewees, this security actor position emerged due to domestic political stability, a proactive foreign policy, and development of national defense industry.⁴² Turkey is now prioritizing its role as a regional security actor and is thus implicated in all the security challenges in its regions: in the Black Sea, in Syria, in Iraq, and in the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, while there has been much talk about Turkey's hard power leaning foreign policy, when you look at the geographical scope of this activism it is largely centred on the Turkish near abroad. Our interviewees agreed that Turkey will continue to be a "security actor" in its regions, regardless of which political party is in power. In other words, pro-government analysts almost unanimously felt the need to mention that although Turkey's regional role has continuity from earlier periods, the way it manifests itself today has changed significantly.

This increasing emphasis on (re)framing the Turkish foreign policy as a regional power also corresponds to the claims that Turkey is not only a regional power, but also a "central power" that has to trust only itself to secure its interests. This role conception has earlier versions throughout the republican era, though the pro-government pundits painstakingly refrain from mentioning them when analyzing current policies. According to our pro-government interviewees, Turkey as a central power believe in projecting power and assuring national security in military terms because they feel that they have exhausted all other options.

Our analysis demonstrates that Turkey has acquired a regional security actor role – both in academic terms and in the eyes of its decision-makers. Moreover, it is increasingly being seen in this role by outside powers – although not always with approval. However, this is not a new role for Turkey as it has always been an important regional actor, even when it did not pursue this position. Throughout the AKP period, however, there has been a conscious effort to re-focus Turkey's attention on its neighborhood instead of the West, and to re-conceptualize Turkey as an autonomous foreign policy actor in line with the domestic discourse. The pro-government interviewees argued that Turkey uses military means because it has exhausted all its options – the country is isolated in a dangerous neighborhood without allies that share their national security concerns and interests, and it is not being accorded the status it deserves regionally or otherwise.

Strategic Patterns of Behavior

Within the above-mentioned constraints, drivers and role conceptions, several strategic patterns of behavior emerge, some of which correspond to Turkey's earlier foreign policy lines, others stem from previous policies, and others are recent additions or expansions. "Balancing major powers in international relations" and "attaining regional supremacy" are two of the more prominent patterns to have emerged from previous policies and have shifted with the AKP coming to power. These two concepts are closely connected and have come to dominate Turkey's recent activism in its foreign and security policies, both are discussed further below.

Balancing (and Countering) Major Powers in International Relations

During the latter part of the Ottoman Empire, the practice of balancing major powers was a strategy to preserve the status quo and slow down the loss of territory. It was further used as a tool during the Independence War (1919-1923), during the Second World War (1939-1945), during the detente period (from the late 1960s to mid 1970s), and from 2010 – as can be seen through Turkey's

⁴² Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020.

balancing act between its Western allies and its regional partners, chiefly the Russian Federation.⁴³ Russia's countering effect against the US has become increasingly important in the post-Cold War era as Turkey has moved towards a more assertive foreign policy. The effects are especially important and pronounced in the Middle East and Black Sea contexts. As such, balancing major powers in international relations could be considered as one of the longest serving Turkish strategies in its foreign and security policies. This also clearly seems to be one of the aspects of the current government's policy implementation today. As such, this aspect of current Turkish foreign policy deserves a further analysis which will be taken up in the next section.

On the other side of the coin, balancing major powers in its external relations, when combined with Turkey's more activist and persistent policies in its neighborhood, have recently produced a somewhat unexpected aspect of the need to counter the impacts of major powers in different zones of influence which also at times necessitates confrontations with them. This stems from the fact that all the global powers, aside from China, are already diplomatically and militarily engaged near Turkish borders. Indeed, both the US and Russia have ground forces in Syria, in addition to their formidable political and diplomatic existence. The US also has forces stationed in almost all the Middle Eastern countries. Russia meanwhile has forces in Crimea (Ukraine), Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), Armenia and Azerbaijan as peacekeepers. Similarly, various European countries have forces in Turkey's vicinity, including the UK which have two sovereign bases in Cyprus, France which has an arrangement with Cyprus to allow French naval forces to use Cypriot ports, and a limited number of French and British special forces in Syria who are operating in connection with the US.⁴⁴

Recently, however, Turkey has demonstrated its abilities through its operations in Syria, Libya, Eastern Mediterranean, and its advisory position in Azerbaijan, when faced with geostrategic spheres of influence of global powers. Thus, as some pro-government analysts argue, Turkey's proactive approach of dealing with troubles directly at their source brings Turkey into clashes with global powers.⁴⁵ The clashes are a result of differing objectives in the region: Turkey aims to create room for its national interests and to garner more room for independent maneuver within disputed zones.

According to our analysis, the Turkish political leaders' risk assessments for Turkish national security still include its historical adversaries and geopolitical competitors such as Russia, Iran, Greece, and Egypt. As a result, Turkey's future security posture will still probably reflect its vital concerns of territorial integrity and political independence, whether in a transatlantic, European or unilateral context. As such, its ongoing operational involvements can be seen in a co-centric circle of interest with Turkish Armed Forces 1) deployments in cross-border operations in northern Iraq and northern Syria, 2) overseas military existence in Libya and the Caucasus, 3) overseas bases/installations in Somalia and Qatar, and 4) multinational military engagements in Kosovo and Afghanistan. While the first activities indicate the inner circle of Turkey's engagements, the second and third constitute the outer limit of Turkey's activities in recent years. These dimensions indicate not only Turkey's ambitions in its foreign policy, but also the need to devise new foreign and security policies and strategies for Turkey. The limitations and constraints of Turkey's increasing military engagements, which have recently extended to cover an area of roughly 55 million km² from Libya in the West to Afghanistan in the east, and from Moldova in the north to Somalia in the south, will be taken up later in section 3.

⁴³ See Aydin, M. (2020a), "Grand Strategizing in and for Turkish Foreign Policy: Lessons Learned from History, Geography, and Practice"; Aydin, M. (2018). "Foreign Policy, 1923-2018". In: Özerdem, A., M. Whiting (eds.), Routledge Handbook on Turkish Politics. London and New York, Routledge: 367-377; Aydin, M. (2020b). "Doctrines, Strategies, and Tactics in Turkish Foreign Policy": In: N. Doğan and A. Sözen (eds.), *Turkish Foreign Policy II*. Eskişehir, Anadolu University: 2-31.

⁴⁴ Seligman, L. (2019). "Britain France Agree to Send Additional Troops to Syria". *Foreign Policy*, July 9, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/09/britain-france-agree-to-send-additional-troops-increase-syria-us-withdrawal-uk/>

⁴⁵ Duran, B. (2021). "Foreword". In M. Yeşiltaş (Ed.). *SETA security radar. Turkey's security landscape in 2021 Strategic flexibility under geopolitical anxiety*, p: 8-9. <https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2021/01/R181En.pdf>

Attaining Regional Supremacy through Power Projection in Near Abroad

Attaining some sort of primus role in its neighborhood has emerged as a widely shared goal in post-Cold War Turkey. At one time or another, almost all the parties across the political spectrum have supported an active position for Turkey in its region. This is evident through the policies followed by governments, with different political identities targeted at Turkey's near abroad when facing crises or opportunities to expand,⁴⁶ as well as frequent complaints from extra regional interference in regional affairs. It is clear from recent history that whenever Turkey has felt strong enough to play a regional role, and the focus of the global hegemon moved elsewhere, it has stirred to acquire a greater role in its neighborhood.

In the 2000s, Turkey used its growing economic power and political influence and focused on openings to new regions, especially in the wider Middle East. At this time, friendly relations with neighbors and playing facilitator role in regional problems were seen as essential for Turkey's regional leadership, potentially leading to a global role. However, regional developments such as the Arab uprisings, the Syrian Civil War and the following "great power geopolitical rivalries" led Turkey moving away from its "zero-problem" principle in favor of "order builder" model – i.e., moving away from soft power to hard power instruments. With the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), increased PKK militancy, sectarian rivalries, proxy warfare, and widespread refugee movements, Turkey moved to further interventionism in its neighborhood. The emphasis was then on a (forward) defensive posture rather than expansion of influence. These developments have affected both Turkey's regional relations and its global standing.

As a result, Turkey has extended its power projection capabilities in its near abroad through its intervention in Syrian civil war, involvement in Libyan civil war where it sided with the Government of National Accord, its support to Azerbaijan in its attempt to regain control over its occupied Karabakh territory, and finally in the stand-off against the coalition of Greece, France, Egypt and Greek Cypriots in the Eastern Mediterranean. It has also established a military base at the Tariq bin Ziyad military base outside Doha, Qatar, in October 2015 and reinforced it with navy and air units in August 2019.⁴⁷ Demonstrating an ability to extend its power projection beyond its immediate neighborhood, Turkey has also been part of twelve UN, NATO and EU led peace support operations abroad in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lebanon, Somalia, and Iraq⁴⁸ (See Figure 6).

Turkey's overt military and covert intelligence operations in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus are also important from another perspective as it has managed to combine its national resources and forces to act in a designated overseas theater of operation with coordinated command configuration and without using NATO structures. For some of our interviewees, this clearly indicates that "Turkey is more than a regional power" but a central power with "enough capacity to reach beyond the Middle East". While there is a common perception of Turkey in international literature that frames it as a

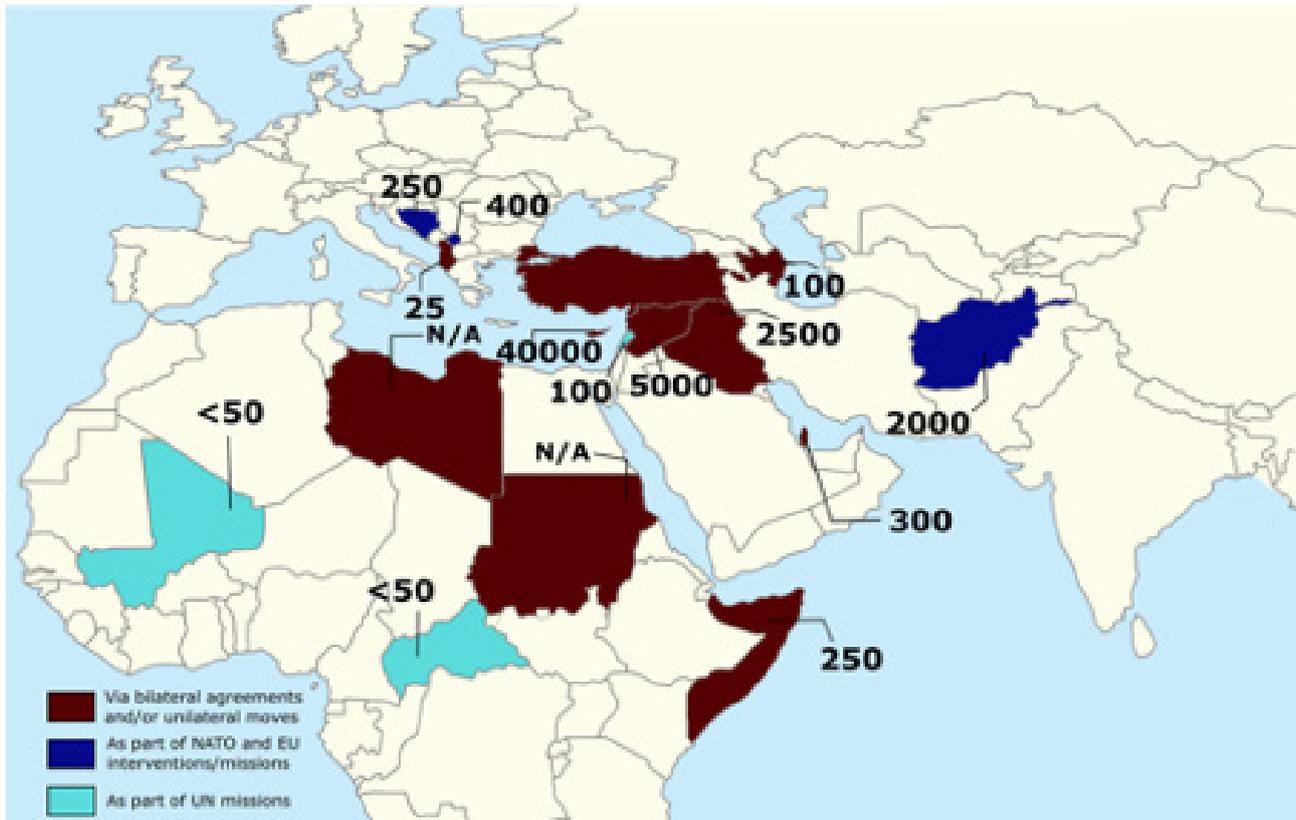
⁴⁶ It was Republican People's Party of the one-party system that annexed Hatay, while left-of-center Republican People's Party and moderate-Islamist National Salvation Party coalition conducted Cyprus Peace Operation in 1974. It was the center-right liberal Motherland Party that repeatedly sent Turkish soldiers across the Iraqi border in late 1980s and 1990s, while the coalition of social-democrat Democratic Left Party, nationalist-right Nationalist Action Party, and Motherland Party created semi-permanent military bases in Iraq, and finally right-of-center liberal Islamist Justice and Development Party oversaw expansion of Turkey's use of its military might internationally from Qatar to Libya in 2010s.

⁴⁷ Turkish military presence in Qatar is only the second to the American military base at al-Udaid. Turkey has brigade level military representative in Qatar as of November 2020.

⁴⁸ "Contribution of the TAF to Peace Support Operations". Headquarter of General Chief of Staff, <https://www.tsk.tr/Sayfalar?viewName=ContributionToTafToPeace>. The twelve peace support operations are: EU Operation Althea, Kosovo Force (KFOR), UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM), UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), Operation Sea Guardian, Standing Naval Force (SNF), Defense and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative, Konya Forward Operating Base Support to NATO Airborne early Warning & Control (NAEW&C) Force, NATO Mission Iraq (NMI).

“bridge” or “gate” between Asia, Europe and Africa,⁴⁹ Turkey also clearly represents a dynamic center in its geography. The image of bridge/gate metaphor implying a somewhat static position, especially in the eyes of the political elite currently running the country, is no longer sufficient to represent Turkey’s reality as it has now achieved a “dynamic center” status that highlights its maneuverability in international arena in the eyes of its governing elites. Turkey’s recent activities in the wider geography indicates to this understanding.

FIGURE 6: TURKISH OVERSEAS MILITARY PRESENCE IN NUMBERS AS OF JANUARY 2020.



Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/emf9er/overseas_military_presence_of_the_turkish_army_as/

⁴⁹ Yanık, L. K. (2009). “The Metamorphosis of Metaphors of Vision: ‘Bridging’ Turkey’s Location, Role and Identity After the End of the Cold War”. *Geopolitics*, 14 (3): 531-54.

SECTION II: BALANCING ACTIONS IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

As briefly explained above, “balancing major powers in international relations” has emerged as one of the consistently applied strategic behavior of Turkish foreign policy in recent years, although it has its roots in earlier republican and even the imperial experience. As such, both the practice of balancing and the national role perception of a balancer are seen as important components of the current leadership’s understanding of Turkey’s international positioning. As a result, to advance its interests, Turkey frequently uses balancing both as a diplomatic and military tactic. The following section takes a closer look at the strategy of balancing by analyzing some of the relational patterns between Turkey and some of its Western partners as well as between Turkey and Russia. It will then analyze how Turkey is trying to balance its relations and policies within and between regions.

Balancing Between Russia and the West

Turkey’s relations with the West have frequently been problematic, even in its golden days. Ankara’s desire to be accepted as an equal member of the Western world has always been accompanied with a profound anxiety about the Western-dictated international order. As discussed in the first section, the fear of the West infiltrating the nation to exploit internal divisions had its roots in the trauma of the collapse of the multi-national Ottoman Empire. Despite inclusion in the political (Council of Europe), economic (OECD and EBRD), security (NATO, OSCE, now defunct Western European Union), and cultural (Eurovision, European Cup etc.) institutions of the West, this deeply held fear and anxiety over the possible dismemberment of the Turkish state by a combination of internal treason and external betrayal have exerted a strong influence in Turkey’s security culture and mainstream foreign policy agenda.⁵⁰

Turkey’s relations with Russia, and its predecessors has been historically problematic and hostile. Turkey and Russia have a history of competition over a shared neighborhood in which hostility and tension has informed the relations. This history still affects current decision-makers, despite the more recent upsurge in cooperation. The relationship between Turkey and Russia is characterized as an elite-driven process, mainly shaped by the agencies of Erdoğan and Putin, meaning that it is not institutionalized and thus lacks institution-building mechanisms, even in the main areas of interaction (economy, security and defense). Turkey does not trust Russia’s commitment to their interests and a general skepticism that is rooted both in the historical memory and in recent/current experiences prevails.

As discussed previously in the report, the Turkish leadership desires Turkey to be a regional power in its own right. As such, it perceives the need to balance both US assertiveness and Russian resurgence in its near abroad. However, the positioning of Turkey might also turn into a dual dependency situation, characterized by a vulnerability to Russia, an increased need for assurances from the NATO against a resurgent Russia in the Black Sea and continuing volatility in Syria. In

⁵⁰ White, J. (2014). “Turkey at a tipping point”. *Current History*, 767: 356-361; Aydın, M. (2003). “Securitization of History and Geography; Understanding of Security in Turkey”. *Journal of Southeastern Europe and Black Sea Studies*, 3 (2): 163-184.

the following, we discuss this balancing act and focus on the relational aspect of these regularly conflicting partnerships.

Turkey and the West

Throughout the Cold War, Turkey turned to the West and depended on the US for its security, and the Turkish economy was gradually integrated into that of Europe. Turkey also displayed a growing willingness to pursue even more deepening ties with the West in the aftermath of the Cold War, applying for full EU membership and upgrading its relations with the US to a “strategic partnership” level.

Even before the initiation of the accession negotiations with the EU in 2005, Turkish relations with Europe began to sour due to the EU admission of the Greek-Cypriot controlled Republic of Cyprus before the solution of the issue between Greece and Turkey, and despite the rejection of the Annan Plan by the Greek Cypriots in 2004. The growing anti-establishment political parties in Europe with their anti-enlargement and xenophobic positions against Turkish membership made matters worse and caused mainstream European politicians to take a firmer stance against Turkey’s full membership during the EU constitution referenda in the Netherlands and France.⁵¹ The frustration of the Turkish political elite grew as the EU enlargement went forward in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans without Turkey. Many believed that the EU was employing double standards, and that “the EU would not accept Turkey whatever Turkey would do”.⁵²

As relations soured with the EU, Turkey went through a process of “de-Europeanisation” where the EU membership has lost both its normative/political context and its leverage over Turkey as a reference point in domestic settings and public debates. The weakening of the appeal and influence of European institutions, policies, norms and values then led to a growing skepticism within Turkish society towards the EU/Europe agenda, strategic orientation, and European values that the country.⁵³ As a result, relations between Turkey and the EU have shifted to a transactional mode, favoring bilateral to multilateral relations, rejecting value-based policymaking and focusing on short-term gains.

The 2016 migration deal is one of the more recent examples of the transactional relationship between Turkey and the EU. In the deal, Turkey promised to accept the return of all irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to Greece and to take necessary measures to prevent new migrants crossing the EU border. In return, the EU pledged to allocate 6 billion Euros for the refugees in Turkey, to accelerate visa liberalization with Europe and to upgrade the Customs Union.⁵⁴ The deal was highly criticized because it was a short-term transactional solution to a normative and humanitarian crisis. While both sides focused on their short-term interests rather than a long-term structural relationship,⁵⁵ the deal did not even resolve the underlying tension regarding the refugee flow between Turkey and the EU. In March 2020, the Turkish government declared its Greek border open to millions of displaced people currently in the country in a bid to pressure the EU into supporting the Turkish

⁵¹ Balta, E. (2005). “The ceasefire this time”. *MERIP Online*, August 31, <https://www.merip.org/mero/mero083105>

⁵² Balta, E. and S. Özel (2019). *The End of an Enduring Alliance? Turkey and the West*. Institute de Bosphore Publications, Policy Paper, <http://www.institut-bosphore.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/IBPolicyPaper3.pdf>

⁵³ Aydın-Düzgit, S. and A. Kaliber (2016). “Encounters with Europe in an era of domestic and international turmoil: is Turkey a de-Europeanizing candidate country?” *South European Society and Politics*, 21(1): 1-14, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2016.1155282; Aydın-Düzgit, S. (2016). “De-Europeanisation through discourse: A critical discourse analysis of AKP’s election speeches”. *South European Society and Politics*, 21(1): 45-58, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2016.1155282.

⁵⁴ European Parliament (2020). “Towards a new policy on migration: EU-Turkey statement and action plan”. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>.

⁵⁵ Bashirov, G. and I. Yilmaz (2020). “The rise of transactionalism in international relations: evidence from Turkey’s relations with the European Union”. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 74 (2): 165-184.

position in Syria.⁵⁶ The declaration was followed by movement of refugees towards the border area which created yet another humanitarian crisis.

Another example of this transactional mode is the discussion on the modernization of the 1995 Customs Union Agreement between Turkey and the EU. As of 2020, Turkey is the EU's 5th largest trading partner, and the EU is by far Turkey's number one import and export partner (42.4%), as well as a source of investment. After several years of rapid growth, the Commission proposed in December 2016 to modernize the Customs Union to further extend trade relations, but the Council has yet to adopt necessary mandate in an attempt to create a leverage point on Turkey.⁵⁷ The transactional mode also resulted in diverging policies among the EU member states towards Turkey. While Germany, under Merkel, have continued to have a form of appeasement policy with Turkey, Macron's France had hardening attitude specifically on Turkey's role in the Mediterranean.

Similar transactionality can also be observed in Turkey's relations with the US. The relations were already tense at the beginning of the US military intervention in Iraq as the Turkish Parliament voted not to allow the transit of US troops from Turkey to Iraq. This blow to the US plans was followed by a major public diplomacy crisis on July 4, 2003 when the headquarters of the Turkish military personnel in Sulaymaniyah, northern Iraq, were raided by US forces who arrested Turkish soldiers and put hoods on their heads. This incident affected Turkey's political psyche significantly.

The Syrian civil war has significantly complicated the relationship between Turkey and the US. Although the two countries worked together at the beginning of the war, Turkey soon realized that the US was not willing to invest significant resources to the war effort and lacked a definitive strategy. With the rise and territorial gains of ISIL, the US opted to work with and support the YPG through political and military means. This cooperation was perceived as an existential security threat by Turkey and has since created serious repercussions for bilateral relations.

Further, Turkey's relationship with Russia has been affected by the US support to the PKK affiliated YPG and the almost non-presence of the US in Syria. While Russia and Turkey are not completely on the same page regarding Syria or the Syrian Kurds, Turkish government officials feel that Russia will listen to their interests – in contrast to the US who do not show due concern towards Turkish regional security interests. In fact, Turkey was only able to intervene militarily in Syria through an agreement with Russia regarding the opening of Syrian airspace in Turkey. Furthermore, Ankara thinks that Washington's plans about the PYD could extend to the post-war design and rebuilding efforts in Syria, which, coupled with the existence of de facto independent KRG in Iraq, heightens Turkey's concerns with regard to wider US plans in the Middle East vis-à-vis Kurds and Turkey.

In general, Turkey's relations with the West have suffered from lukewarm condemnations of the 2016 failed coup attempt and the lack of early response. Turkish political leaders have accused Western capitals of directly or indirectly supporting coup plotters, or at best not giving enough support to Turkey's democratically elected leadership. Washington especially comes under suspicion because the supposed mastermind of the coup attempt, Fethullah Gülen, still resides in the US, despite pressure from Turkey to deport him or curtail his activities. Relations with European countries have also soured over the issue as the European capitals have distanced themselves from Turkey as a result of the declaration of the emergency rule following the coup attempt which suspended various democratic and legal rights, bringing Turkey closer to authoritarianism.

Ankara, however, complained that its Western partners were not sensitive to the existential security concerns that Turkey faced, specifically regarding the Kurdish problem and FETÖ. Moreover, according to several interviewees, Ankara also fails to find support from Western actors when it deals with Russia, economic troubles, energy dependency, or refugees. Thus, as one of our interviewees argues,

⁵⁶ "Erdoğan warns 'millions' of refugees heading to Europe". *Deutsche Welle*, March 2, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/Erdoğan-warns-millions-of-refugees-heading-to-europe/a-52603580>.

⁵⁷ European Commission (2020). *Enhancement of EU-Turkey bilateral trade relations and modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union*. <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/turkey/>.

the government now asks itself; “what is the use of the West?”⁵⁸ More significantly, government critics and wider segments of Turkish society are asking the same questions. There is a clear skepticism about the West among the general public, which is affecting Turkey’s foreign policy thinking.

It is now a widely held belief that the West intends to destabilize Turkey through supporting Kurds or coup attempts. The perception is that although Turkey contributes to European security by providing a buffer zone for refugees, the West does not contribute anything to Turkey, either politically or economically. When it comes to security, the perception is that Turkey’s security needs have widely diverged from the US in the Middle East and the EU has become captive to the whims of its smaller members, Greece and Cyprus. This perception has also become one of the drivers of Turkey’s balancing act between Russia and the West. As one interviewee put it, government officials acknowledge that they are met with criticisms when they travel to Western capitals, while they are welcomed with open arms when visiting Moscow. Moreover, the feeling of being left out of Europe has created sort of a bond between Turkey and Russia which encourages a closer relationship with a very strong emotional dimension that has observed different shocks in the relations.⁵⁹

The purchase of S-400 missiles from Russia by Turkey has created one of the most significant crises, not only between the US and Turkey but also between NATO and Turkey.⁶⁰ The US administration responded by excluding Turkey from the F-35 program and the US Congress mandated the President to apply sanctions in compliance with the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).⁶¹ On December 14, 2020, the Trump Administration imposed sanctions on Turkey and put a ban on all US export licenses and authorizations to the Republic of Turkey’s Presidency of Defense Industries as well as an asset freeze and visa restrictions on the organization’s president and other top officers.⁶²

Regarding Turkey’s relations with NATO, there was previously a general understanding in Turkey about the value of NATO’s contribution to its security during the Cold War, especially its nuclear umbrella. However, as threat perceptions have shifted especially since the early 2000s, NATO’s value has been increasingly questioned in Turkey. Similarly, there was a general understanding among the NATO members regarding Turkey’s value to the security of transatlantic area despite several problematic issues over the years between Turkey and some of the NATO member countries. Most of these issues were the result of a spillover of bilateral conflictual issues between member states into the Alliance and were dealt with diplomatically within NATO. However, the voices within NATO arguing that Turkey has had diverged sufficiently to question its value to the Alliance have increased recently. This aligns with voices within Turkey that argue that Turkey’s security needs have diverged from NATO to the extent that they should seek alternative security partnerships.

Within Turkey the Eurasianist/nationalist coalition within the government and the military increasingly argue that NATO does not respond to Turkey’s overall security concerns and that Turkey should design its own security strategies relying solely on its own power. Outside Turkey, one hears questions about the future of Turkey inside NATO and also occasional calls from high level allied politicians calling an end to Turkey’s NATO membership, even though there is no stipulation in NATO Charter allowing such a development.

In any case, seen from a realist perspective, the likelihood that Turkey and NATO would part ways is very slim. Although we see Turkey today engaging with states like Russia through strategic partnerships within the security domain, these relations will most probably not be institutionalized, and the strategic culture of Turkey’s security institutions will continue to be deeply attached to NATO.

⁵⁸ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020.

⁵⁹ Online interview with an Ankara based Turkish expert from think tank community. August 2020.

⁶⁰ Egeli, S. (2019). “Making Sense of Turkey’s Air and Missile Defense Merry-go-round”. *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy & Peace*, 8 (1), DOI: 10.20991/allazimuth.470640.

⁶¹ Seligman, L. (2019). “US lawmakers move to punish Turkey for buying Russian missile system”. *Foreign Policy*, December 10, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/10/us-lawmakers-move-punish-turkey-buying-russian-missile-system-s400/>.

⁶² “US sanctions Turkey over purchase of Russian S-400 missile system”, *CNBC* <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/14/us-sanctions-turkey-over-russian-s400.html>

Furthermore, despite occasional fiery rhetoric, NATO provides regional and global deterrence for Turkey, which would be irreplaceable. Turkey is only too aware that left alone against resurgent Russia in its neighborhood, it might soon face an impossible choice between Finlandization and trying to put up a resistance against Russian pressures similar to the end of the second World War. Furthermore, Turkey would not wish to be outside NATO while Greece is still a member and Cyprus would soon become one if there is no Turkey blockage, which would unmanageably tip the balances in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean against Turkey. NATO also has value to Turkey's defence industry, security culture, force-multiplication, and civilizational connections. For NATO, too, Turkey is an important partner not only because of the size of its armed forces - the second largest within the alliance- and the competence of its soldiers displayed in different theaters of operation, but also its irreplaceable geopolitical position. The negative potential of having Turkey as an adversary in the middle of these region is unconcealable. Moreover, beyond the military/security field, Turkey's presence within the Western structures with its Muslim-majority population provides irreplaceable political and cultural legitimacy in its connections in the MENA region and wider world.

To conclude, our analysis indicates that the relationship between Turkey and the West is currently characterized largely by transactionality on both sides. This lessens the West's leverage and soft power influence on Turkey in issues such as pushing for democratic reforms. Although the Biden presidency emphasizes the role of norms and values more in bilateral relations and underlined a return to multilateralism,⁶³ as of now, the major approach of the US to Turkey has not been radically transformed.

Having said this, a forced non-transactional approach at this point in time, where Western countries condition their relations with Turkey on a value-based approach would most likely lead the Turkish leadership to turn elsewhere. Furthermore, it would not have a positive impact upon the majority of the Turkish public either, as such a policy would come across as being founded on Western double standards - i.e., "the Western partners only talks about values when it suits them". Thus, there exists an inter-dependency relationship between Turkey and the West that feeds the continuation of the current transactional approach, even if it is not the most productive one.

Although there are some obvious problems in the relationship between the West and Turkey in general, our research does not indicate that the relations will break in the immediate future. The structural ties between the two as well as perceived benefits for both, act as drivers to stay connected and committed.

Relations with Russia

The American alliance with the PYD and the Western reaction to the 2016 coup attempt became important factors in increasing anti-Western sentiments and encouraging closer relations with Russia. Both President Erdoğan and President Putin share the view that the unilateral actions of the United States around the world, and specifically in areas where their respective states seek a role, is one of the most significant problems in current global politics. Both Russia and Turkey are motivated to balance the interests of the West and demonstrate a certain disdain on the motives of Western countries which plays an important role in their relationship.⁶⁴

However, it is also important to note that both countries have competing geopolitical interests in the Middle East, the Black Sea, and the Caucasus, where the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan could always be a potential destabilizer for the relationship.⁶⁵ However,

⁶³ White House (2021): Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, March 03, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Balta, E. and M. Çelikpala (2020). "Turkey and Russia: Historical Patterns and Contemporary Trends in Bilateral Relations". In: G. M. Tezcür (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics*. Oxford University Press, DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190064891.001.0001

⁶⁵ Gauthier-Villars, D., and A. M. Simmons (2020). "Turkey's foray into Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict tests Russia's influence". *The Wall Street Journal*, October 2, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkeys-foray-into-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-tests-russias-influence-11601656026>

there seems to be a recently emerging pattern in Turkish-Russian relations: When the parties come across a particularly contentious issue with interests difficult to reconcile, they agree on an interim resolution and leave the final settlement to the future. For example, Turkey and Russia were moved to the brink of war in the beginning of 2020 over Syria, specifically the status of Idlib, possible autonomy for the Kurds, and the role of the Turkish-backed Sunni opposition in Syria's future. However, in March 2020, Turkey and Russia reached a ceasefire deal over Idlib which legitimized (at least in bilateral terms) and solidified the Turkish military presence in Idlib and stopped the attacks on Turkish military personnel which were threatening to unravel Russian-Turkish relations.⁶⁶ The deal thus froze the situation in the area without a clear solution to the mutually exclusive interests of both parties. More recently, in the geopolitical competition in Libya, where Turkey and Russia emerged as competitors, they managed to hang on to an interim agreement instead of finalizing a settlement, as a result both emerged as the most consequential players in the region. While both sides accused each other of using their Libyan partners for their national benefits and employing mercenaries to bolster their positions, they were nevertheless able to agree on imposing a ceasefire line between main opposing groups while keeping other actors at bay.

Furthermore, these geopolitical tensions have not overshadowed the economic cooperation between the two countries. In fact, increasing economic cooperation and foreign trade patterns are major factors that explain the dynamics of the bilateral relations. Studies show that states with high levels of trade and institutional mechanisms that sustain trade are less prone to disputes than other states.⁶⁷ By 2015, Russia had become Turkey's third largest trading partner in imports (the first two being China and Germany) and eleventh largest in exports (the first two being Germany and the UK).⁶⁸ Russia is also a major investment site for Turkish construction companies that flourished during the successive AKP governments as the Turkish model of economic growth was increasingly based on the expansion of the construction sector.⁶⁹

The economic cooperation between the two countries, however, is taking place in the context of a huge trade imbalance in favor of Russia. According to the World Bank, for every dollar worth of Russian imports that Turkey purchased in 2018, it exported just 15 cents of its own goods to Russia.⁷⁰ Further, it would be relatively easy for Russia to "exit" its economic relationship with Turkey as the existing deficit emerges from the nature of the bilateral trade relations, in which Turkey's gas and oil imports constitute a major portion of the overall volume. In 2018, Russia was Turkey's top supplier of natural gas and provided fully 47 percent of Turkish natural gas imports.⁷¹ Russia also provided 36 percent of Turkey's coal imports during the same year.⁷² The over-reliance on a single country has long been regarded as both an important energy security issue, and an important matter for Turkey's overall national security. AKP governments therefore proposed using nuclear energy to diversify Turkey's energy resources. However, the contract for the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, the first in Turkey, was also given to a Russian company, Rosatom, which increased worries about granting Russia control over a significant part of electricity production and generation.⁷³ On the

⁶⁶ Dalay, G. (2020). "How long will the Turkish-Russian deal on Idlib last?" *Aljazeera*, March 16, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/3/16/how-long-will-the-turkish-russian-deal-on-idlib-last/?gb=true>.

⁶⁷ Mansfield, E. D. and J. C. Pevehouse (2000). "Trade blocs, trade flows, and international conflict." *International Organization*, 54 (4): 775-808.

⁶⁸ Turkish Statistical Institute Database, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr>

⁶⁹ Balta and Çelikpala (2020). "Turkey and Russia".

⁷⁰ "World Integrated Trade Solution. Turkey: Exports, Imports, and Trade Balance, 2018", <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/TUR/Year/2018/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-countr>

⁷¹ "Natural Gas Market in Turkey". *Petform*, <https://www.petform.org.tr/en/dogal-gaz-piyasasi/turkiye-dogal-gaz-piyasasi/> Cited in S. Özel and G. Uçar (2019). «The economics of Turkey-Russia relations». *EDAM Foreign Policy & Security*, 10, 18, https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Economics-of-Turkey-Russia-Relations_compressed.pdf.

⁷² De Wilde, P. and D. Lalor (2019). "Turkey's 2018 Thermal Coal Imports down 4.5% to 31.5 Mil Mt." *S & P Global Platts*, February 4, <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/coal/020419-turkeys-2018-thermal-coal-imports-down-45-to-315-mil-m>

⁷³ Balta and Çelikpala (2020). "Turkey and Russia."

other hand, Turkey was able to substantially decrease the percentage of Russian gas in its imports in the last two years as cheaper shell gas from the US as well as more Azerbaijani gas became available. As the long-term gas supply agreements with “buy or pay” stipulations between Turkey and Russia are ending, 2021 will see negotiations on the future of gas trade between the two countries.

The transportation of energy resources, especially natural gas, is another vital issue which, beyond its economics, significantly alters power projections and geopolitical interests. In October 2016, Turkey and Russia signed a deal on TurkStream, which became fully operational on 1 January 2020, and will make Turkey an important hub for European gas market. For Russia, the pipeline will substantially reduce its dependence on Ukraine and Eastern Europe, while helping to further seal its dominance over European gas markets. These kinds of deals clearly encourage both states to resolve their political differences, create more compatible regional policies, and prompt emergence of further economic networks.⁷⁴

We need to note here that the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia is not necessarily based on an attraction between authoritarian regimes. Rather, the resemblance that has facilitated cooperation between the two countries is the intense *personalization* of their decision-making processes.⁷⁵ Unlike the Western countries – with a possible exemption of the Trump administration in the US – Russia has proven uniquely adept at courting other personalized regimes and displays a more flexible characteristic. However, while the highly personalized nature of Turkish and Russian decision-making procedures has strengthened bilateral ties, it has also fueled volatility in the relationship.⁷⁶

In fact, Turkey and Russia have been unable to develop their partnership of convenience into a more integrated comprehensive partnership. As a result, the relationship still remains transactional. This also indicates that the two countries do not share a mutually comprehensive security plan for the regions in which they are both active. Aside from their disdain of the West, the relationship mostly corresponds to short-term interests, lacks principles and norms, and moves forward with a highly personalized decision-making style of their leaders.

Nevertheless, despite this lack of a shared vision for the Middle East, the Black Sea, or the Caucasus, the striking feature of the bilateral relationship is its resilience in the face of repeated, and at times existential, crises. As one of our interviewees put it, Turkey has been able to display a very flexible foreign policy approach vis-a-vis Russia, while at the same time knowing that “Russia, as a very prominent actor in Turkey’s immediate neighborhoods, creates considerable constraints on Turkey’s foreign policy and strategy. Russia is basically blocking Turkey’s natural spheres of influences in the Caucasus, Northern Syria and Northern Iraq, and dominates the Black Sea. However, Turkey is limited in its confrontation with Russia because in certain aspects it is dependent on Russia –specifically in energy supply which it cannot easily diversify because of US sanctions on Iran.”⁷⁷ Turkey overcomes this dilemma, according to one interviewee, by acting as a NATO member in certain issues and regions, specifically in the Black Sea, and sometimes acting as if it is an autonomous actor. This incoherence, according to interviewee, is a “balancing act”.⁷⁸

Another interviewee argued that Turkey is crucial in Western attempts to balance Russia. He argued that it is “hard to understand why the EU/Europe does not see the role of Turkey in all this. If one takes out Turkey from the equation, Europe will be much weaker; NATO will be much weaker. Why are European leaders so shortsighted on these issues? If Russia controls Libya, then Russia will comfortably threaten Europe’s security. Also, Russia will be an actor in Africa while Macron is

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Aydin-Düzgüt, S., E. Balta, and A. O’Donohue (2020). “Turkey, Russia, and the West: Reassessing persistent volatility, asymmetric interdependence, and the Syria conflict”. İstanbul, İstanbul Policy Center, <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/Document/reassessing-persistent-volatility-asymmetric-interdependence-and-the-syria-conflict-93d479/reassessing-persistent-volatility-asymmetric-interdependence-and-the-syria-conflict-93d479.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020.

⁷⁸ I.e.; Online interview with an leftist academic at a Turkish university, August 2020; Online interview with a conservative Turkish expert within the international think-tank community, September 2020

dragging Europe into a big crisis with Turkey. The EU is overwhelmed with hatred towards Turkey, and this is why they do not see their strategic interest.”⁷⁹

As our analysis indicates, the relationship between Turkey and Russia is to some degree a paradox. The divergences in regional outlooks and the opposite sides they take in ongoing conflicts indicate a difficult relationship. While their capability to move beyond their differences and find ways to work together in different geographies indicates a strong relationship. However, their clear *modus operandi* appears to be to agree on interim resolutions when faced conflicting situations and postpone the final settlements indefinitely to the future. The question remains as to the sustainability of such a practice in the longer term. As it is seen today, the relationship is highly transactional (much more so than Turkey’s transactional relationship with the West) and personalized, lacking structural and historical foundations. The relationship also has an imbalance economically, diplomatically, and politically in favor of Russia that the Turkish leaders try to balance by acting as NATO member in certain issues and regions, or independently if the conditions warrant it.

In other words, the Turkish government sees its role as balancer, balancing the West with Russia, while balancing Russia with the West. In the next section, we will discuss how this balancing act plays out in the Black Sea, the Middle East and The Mediterranean.

Balancing the Regions

In balancing its regions of interest, our analysis demonstrates that some of the major drivers for Ankara relate to both foreign and domestic factors. Internationally, Turkey is interested in playing determining roles in the regions surrounding it. However, various actors vying for influence in different regions and various issues and threats emanating from different theaters of operation at different times, force Turkey to concentrate more on one region over others. Moreover, the appearance of the same players in different regions in competition with Turkey, such as Russia both in the Black Sea, the Caucasus, Libya, and Syria, forces Turkey to weigh its advantages in one area with the disadvantages of another area. In such cases, it seems that an aggregate balance in relations is sought by Turkey, and by Russia in its relations with Turkey.

Turkey also aims to balance its relationships with different actors to a varying impact in different theaters if they are involved in more than one zone. For instance, Turkey would side with Russia in Syria against US influence but cooperate with the US in restricting Russian influence in the wider Black Sea area. It might also prefer to cooperate with the EU in the Caucasus but is opposed to its involvement in its disputes with Greece over the Aegean.

The “Arab Spring” uprisings from 2010 onwards ultimately speeded up the regional power competition along two regional axes of power: One led by Saudi Arabia and backed by UAE, Bahrain and Egypt with support from the US and Israel. The second, led by Iran with its various Shia proxies across the region, including but not limited to Hezbollah, the Assad- regime in Syria, and Iraqi central government, backed by a transactional Russian support. Turkey, meanwhile, teamed up with Qatar to create a third axis with expanded muscles up to Libya and Azerbaijan. This third axis is challenging the first axis in the Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Libya, and the second axis in Syria, Northern Iraq, and partly in the Caucasus. The situation is made even more complicated by Turkey’s confrontation of Russia in Libya, Syria and recently in Nagorno Karabakh, the US in Iraq and Syria, Israel in Palestine from different blocs, and outsiders France and Greece in the Mediterranean. This power competition shapes Turkey’s threat perceptions, drives actions and exemplifies a major risk factor in all regions

Domestically, there are various groups lobbying the government from different directions and demanding that more interest be given to different regions or countries in Turkey’s international relations. For example, two of the more important domestic issues in relation to Syria are the position of Kurds in Syria, and the refugees Turkey receives from Syria. As such, Turkey has to balance its

⁷⁹ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, September 2020.

relations with different actors a) to manage tensions with both Russia and the US over their contacts and/or sponsoring of the PKK affiliated YPG which is a major concern for Turkish security; b) to limit the influx of additional Syrian refugees as their existence has become a domestic political problem for the government.

Turkey in the Black Sea

The Black Sea is a geographical space around which six littoral states are located between the EU (and Western structures more broadly) and the Russian Federation (and its normative influence).⁸⁰ It re-emerged into the forefront of global strategic agenda in the first decade of the twenty-first century after Bulgaria and Romania joined NATO and the EU in 2007, the Russia-Georgia War of 2008, the colored revolution in Ukraine in 2013, and Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, the recent uprising in Belarus and finally Nagorno-Karabakh conflict of 2020.

There are currently three NATO member states (Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania) and two partner countries (Ukraine and Georgia) in the Black Sea region. Turkey, once the major flank country in the region in determining NATO priorities, is now being replaced by the US attempts to strengthen its regional military cooperations, especially with Romania. Bulgaria, like Turkey, appears to be trying to balance the West and Russia.⁸¹ Proedrou observes that, in the region “the EU, the US, and the Euro-Atlantic institutions more broadly on the one hand, and Russia on the other, function as anchoring powers, sources of pressure and poles of gravity in the process of the formation of alliances and blocks”.⁸² The influence of the resurgent Russia and the empowered EU have resulted in a region divided, broadly speaking, between pro-EU (and pro-NATO) countries facing Russia, while Turkey tries to balance them. These divisions fuel more tensions in the region and shape the security arrangements and instability. In this context, Turkey is pulled towards specific partnerships and anchors in the Black Sea.

The Black Sea region has become significant for Western energy security, emerging as a hub for the transportation of Caspian, Central Asian and even Middle Eastern hydrocarbon resources to EU countries. The fundamental constituents of this network are Russia as a reserve and a transit country, and Turkey as a consumer and a transit country.⁸³ The Russia-Ukraine natural gas crises of 2006 and 2009 provided a suitable geopolitical environment for Turkey to work with Russia to replace Ukraine as a transit route for Russian gas to Europe. However, Turkey's chances for becoming an energy hub in Eurasia in the near future are challenged by risk of a military escalation between various regional actors, and especially by the possibility of escalation between Russia and the EU/NATO.⁸⁴

The Black Sea region is also significant for geopolitical reasons – the West aim to contain Russia, and Russia aim to strengthen their wider regional hold. In this context, Turkey, once again, finds itself in a balancing role between the West and Russia as a result of its security calculations. Maritime security is a key example of this balancing act is maritime security, which is largely shaped by the Montreux Convention of 1936 that governs the regime on the Turkish Straits and allows for free passage of commercial ships and limits the stay of military ships from non-littoral states in the Black Sea to 21 days. Turkey strongly opposes a large NATO presence in the Black Sea due to a fear of destabilizing the region's balance and pushing Russia into an offensive posture to defend its interests. Thus, Turkey argues that, as a NATO member, it could maintain maritime security in the Black Sea in cooperation with other NATO member and partner countries, as well as Russia. Turkey

⁸⁰ Proedrou, F. (2018). “In quest of governance: The failures of regionalism, a pan-European security architecture and ‘bigemony’ in Black Sea Politics”. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 18 (3): 439-456.

⁸¹ Naumescu, V. (2017). “Stability, ambiguity and change in the discourses of NATO allies in the Black Sea region: The cases of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey.” *Croatian International Relations Review*, 23 (80): 187-209.

⁸² Proedrou (2018). “In quest of governance”, p. 444.

⁸³ Çelikpala, M. (2013). “Turkey and the new energy politics of the Black Sea region”. *Neighborhood Policy Paper*, 5: 1-10, [https://www.khas.edu.tr/cms/cies/dosyalar/files/NeighbourhoodPolicyPaper\(05\)\(2\).pdf](https://www.khas.edu.tr/cms/cies/dosyalar/files/NeighbourhoodPolicyPaper(05)(2).pdf)

⁸⁴ Erşen, E. and M. Çelikpala (2019). “Turkey and the changing energy geopolitics of Eurasia.” *Energy Policy*, 128: 584-592.

has thus acted as a NATO gatekeeper for the Black Sea,⁸⁵ which unintentionally contributed to Russia strengthening its military buildup in the region after the annexation of Crimea. Turkey lost its naval superiority in the Black Sea to Russia⁸⁶ which, after the invasion of Crimea, also resumed its extensive naval activity in the Mediterranean - to the equal alarm of Turkey and NATO. Yet, Turkey rejected the opportunity to regain its dominating naval presence in the Black Sea by not joining anti-Russian EU sanctions, fearing a harsh Russian reaction on the one hand,⁸⁷ and on the other opting to benefit from the “friendlier” posture it adopted in other regions where it also deals with Russia, primarily Syria at the time.

Finally, the region hosts several frozen conflicts which might turn into actual wars. The recent fighting over the Nagorno-Karabakh sets off alarms about the risks of a wider war that might draw in Russia, Turkey and Iran. The existence of several so-called frozen conflicts makes the region ripe for renewal of any of them at any given moment. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkey has for long supported Azerbaijan against Armenia and has provided military training and weapons to Azerbaijan. Armenia, on the other hand, has a defense pact with Moscow and hosts a Russian military base and Russian border guards.⁸⁸ The fighting took place close to the Southern Gas Corridor, which is important to both Europe and Turkey in terms of energy security. As being one of the primary regions of Russian-Turkish competition of influence in the 1990s, it is interesting to see how they have managed to work out an interim arrangement between them. The agreement temporarily ending the war (though not yet the conflict), ensured Azerbaijani territorial integrity, provided Russian peacekeepers in Azerbaijani territory, allowed Turkish soldiers in Azerbaijan outside Nagorno-Karabakh, and foresaw a direct connection between Nakhichevan exclave of Azerbaijan with its mainland, thus linking Turkey directly with Central Asian Turkic countries. Their management of the crises, keeping other actors at bay while negotiating both conflicting parties, also showed their awareness of the possibility that, if allowed to escalate, the conflict could not only risk broader regional fighting but also spill over to other areas of common interest, such as Syria, to ruin their *modus operandi*.

In short, even though Turkey does not always comply with EU and NATO policies in the Black Sea, it has emerged as one of the balancers of Russia. As one of our interviewees who plays a role in Turkish foreign policy decision making process puts it, ‘if you take out Turkey from the Black Sea balance – there will be no power to counter-balance Russia; they invaded Ukraine, they occupied some parts of Georgia, they are highly involved in Syria. They are everywhere.’⁸⁹

Turkey in the Middle East

Turkey became more active in the Middle East starting from 2008 as a result of the revisionist policies of former Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who insisted that Turkey as an independent global power should assert its influence in its neighborhood, especially in the Middle East. Davutoğlu’s successive tenures as foreign minister (2009 to 2014) and prime minister (2014–2016), as well as his part in policy making as a foreign policy advisor to both the PM and the Foreign Minister prior to 2009, were characterized by both an increasingly assertive foreign policy and a pan-Islamist vision that was somewhat erroneously dubbed around the world

⁸⁵ Özdamar, Ö. (2010). “Security and military balance in the Black Sea region”. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 10 (3): 342.

⁸⁶ Güvenç, S. and S. Egeli (2016). “Changing naval balances in the Eastern Mediterranean: Implications for Turkey”. *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 15 (1): 102-103; Delanoë, I. (2014). “After the Crimean crisis: towards a greater Russian maritime power in the Black Sea”. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 14 (3): 367-382.

⁸⁷ Bechev, D. (2017). *Rival power: Russia's influence in Southeast Europe*. New Haven, Yale University Press.

⁸⁸ Kramer, A. E. (2020). “Armenia and Azerbaijan: The conflict explained”. *The New York Times*, October 22, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/03/world/middleeast/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-explained.html>

⁸⁹ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, September 2020.

as “neo-Ottoman”.⁹⁰ As Foreign Minister, Davutoğlu massively increased Turkey’s Middle Eastern involvement, tried to damp down its conflicts with its neighbors and dramatically expanded its trade links with the region.⁹¹ Although Davutoğlu left the AKP to lead an opposition party, the networks that were set up during his period in power are still active, specifically the strengthened transnational links with organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.⁹²

As the Syrian conflict erupted, what Gause called “the new Middle East Cold War” gained momentum with a classical balance of power game played out through links between domestic conflicts, transnational affinities, and regional state ambitions. To consolidate their relations with local clients, regional actors looked for regional allies who share, in some way, their own political and ideological positions.⁹³ The Muslim Brotherhood affiliates’ ascent to power in various countries was an opportunity for the AKP government in Turkey, given that the AKP had historically close relations with the organization. Aydın-Düzgüt shows that Turkey undertook democracy support policies overtly and with the explicit goal of democratic transition in the MENA region during the early phases of the Arab uprisings (2011–2013) and pushed for democratic transitions in the region, under the assumption that Muslim Brotherhood affiliated parties would be the main beneficiaries of democratic turn in the region. Thus, the governing AKP’s historical and ideological affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood was expected to provide a catalyst for Turkey’s regional leadership.⁹⁴

However, two critical regional developments significantly weakened the AKP’s hegemonic vision for the Middle East. First, the loss of the AKP’s transnational network after the coup in Egypt radically altered Turkey’s influence in Syria and Egypt and allowed other regional actors to gain ground. The second was, the rise of Kurdish transnationalism which significantly transformed Turkey’s ontological security concerns, as it received support from the US heightening Turkey’s concerns and undermining its plans in the region.⁹⁵

The situation in the Middle East became even more complicated for Turkey with Russia’s direct engagement in the Syrian war in September 2015. A turning point in Turkey’s involvement in Syria was the downing of a Russian jet by the Turkish military on September 24, 2015. This triggered an unprecedented quarrel between Russia and Turkey, which ended with an effective closure of the Syrian airspace to Turkey, blocking its further involvement in Syria.⁹⁶ Moscow also imposed severe economic sanctions on Turkey.⁹⁷ Relations between Moscow and Ankara remained sour until Erdoğan’s ambivalent apology in June 2016, but rapidly recovered after the attempted coup in July 2016, which Moscow instantly condemned.⁹⁸ Shortly after, in January 2017, Russia initiated the Astana Process for Syria to coordinate and formalize the diplomatic efforts of Russia, Iran and Turkey. The anti-US attitude and a common emphasis on finding a solution for Syria without major

90 Özkan, B. (2014). “Turkey, Davutoğlu and the idea of pan-Islamism”. *Survival*, 56 (4): 119-140. Kıvanç, Ü. (2015). *Pan-İslamcının Macera Kılavuzu*. İstanbul, Birikim Yayınları.

91 Bill, P. (2014). “Turkey’s ‘new’ foreign policy: Newly influential or Just over-active?” *Mediterranean Politics*, 19 (2): 161-164.

92 Özcan, G. (2018). “2000’li yıllarda Türkiye dış politikası, 2002-2016”. *TUSİAD Dış Politika Formu Araştırma Raporu*, <http://www.dispolitikaforumu.com/toplanti-2000li-yillarda-turkiye-dis-politikasi/>

93 Gause, F. G. (2014). “Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East cold war”. Washington D.C., Brookings Institute, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-sectarianism-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/>

94 Aydın-Düzgüt, S. (2020). “Can non-democracies support international democracy? Turkey as a case study”. *Third World Quarterly*, 41 (2): 2.

95 Balta, E. (2016). “Hendek Savaşı Değil, Sınır Savaşı”. *Birikim Online*, <http://www.birikimdergisi.com/haftalik/7424/hendek-savasi-degil-sinir-savasi#W5Jj4GQzbx4>.

96 P. Baev and K. Kirişçi (2017). “An ambiguous partnership: The serpentine trajectory of Turkish-Russian relations in the era of Erdoğan and Putin”. *Brookings Institute*, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/an-ambiguous-partnership-the-serpentine-trajectory-of-turkish-russian-relations-in-the-era-of-erdogan-and-putin/>

97 Özcan, G., Balta, E. and B. Beşgöl (2017). “Giriş “. In: G. Özcan, E. Balta, B. Beşgöl (eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk: Tarihsel Perspektiften Türkiye ve Rusya İlişkiler*. İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları.

98 Baev and Kirişçi (2017). “An ambiguous partnership”.

input from Washington was the most important factor uniting the countries.⁹⁹ The relative absence of the US in the Middle East and the inability of the US and the NATO to offer security guarantees to Turkey allowed Russia to stage a comeback as a major player in the region.¹⁰⁰

The difficult balance and tension between Turkish and Russian positions in Syria became evident when the Trump Administration ordered American troops to withdraw from northeastern Syria on 6 October 2019. Soon after, on 9 October 2019, Turkish military operations in Northern Syria began with a tacit consent from the US. Turkey was thus able to set up a new safe zone in the east of Euphrates River.¹⁰¹ As the US and Turkey began to work together in Syria, however, tensions between Turkey and Russia increased over the status of Idlib and the possible future of the Sunni opposition backed by Turkey. In early 2020, the developments in Idlib started to threaten to unravel Russian-Turkish relations and brought Turkey and Russia to the brink of war, finally forcing them to reach another interim ceasefire deal over Idlib in March 2020. The ceasefire legitimized (at least in bilateral terms) and solidified the Turkish military presence in Idlib.¹⁰² However, the deal only froze the situation in the area and there was no clear solution to the mutually exclusive interests of both parties in wider Syria. As one of our interviewees puts it, “The US has no interest in Idlib. European countries will not help Turkey in Idlib either. So, when and if Russia decides to annex Idlib as a part of Assad regime territory, Turkey will be alone again. Turkey then needs to confront Russia itself. There is a core national interest in not withdrawing from Idlib as withdrawal means that Turkey would have to face similar security challenges within its borders – from Assad regime, from paramilitary groups, from radical Shiite militias, from terrorist cells, etc. “There will also be an influx of refugees. This might even change the government in Turkey. Another flow is not absorbable.”¹⁰³

At the time of writing, Turkey has a major military, intelligence, diplomatic, and administrative presence in Northern Syria which is in conflict with a unified Syria objective of Russia. As Adar argues, “Turkey’s demographic, administrative and military practices in areas that fell under Turkish-SNA control during the Turkish military incursions in 2016, 2018 and 2019 resemble early phases of state formation.”¹⁰⁴ Ankara is extending Turkish administrative structures and practices, in particular in the areas of education, health and humanitarian aid. This puts Turkey at odds with Russia. As one of our interviewees puts it, “Turkey tries to mitigate this dilemma by developing good relations with European countries and the US.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, rather than seeing itself as an ally of Russia all the way, Turkey plays its balancing act in Syria as well.

Turkey in the Mediterranean

The new axis structures that emerged in the Middle East largely stretch into the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey, despite possessing the longest shoreline, is excluded from energy developments in the region which has implications for the region’s future security order. The current tensions in the Mediterranean, similar to the tensions in the Middle East, highlight a major shift in the region: the decline of US power and the rise of regional powers competing for more influence.

⁹⁹ Thépaut, C. (2020). “The Astana process: A flexible but fragile showcase for Russia”. *The Washington Institute*, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-astana-process-a-flexible-but-fragile-showcase-for-russia>

¹⁰⁰ Gören, N. (2018). “The NATO/US-Turkey-Russia strategic triangle: Challenges ahead”. *Center for International & Security Studies at Maryland*, Working Paper, <https://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/20649/Goren-%20NatoUSRussiaTurkeyStrategic011518.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

¹⁰¹ McKernan, B. and J. Borger (2019). “Turkey and Russia agree on deal over buffer zone in Northern Syria”. *The Guardian*, October 22, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/22/turkey-and-russia-agree-deal-over-buffer-zone-in-northern-syria>.

¹⁰² Dalay, “How long will the Turkish-Russian deal on Idlib last?”.

¹⁰³ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Adar, S. “Turkish Intervention in Syria Heightens Authoritarianism in Turkey and Fragmentation in Syria”. *MERIP*, <https://merip.org/2020/07/turkish-intervention-in-syria-heightens-authoritarianism-in-turkey-and-fragmentation-in-syria/>.

¹⁰⁵ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020.

Turkey has become one of the most influential actors in the Eastern Mediterranean in the post-Cold War era with the total withdrawal of the former Soviet 5th Fleet and weakening of US 6th fleet. Recently, it has upped its policy in the region against what it perceives as a wider conspiracy against its regional interests. Recently articulated Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) rhetoric has emerged as a pillar of Turkey's policies in the region, linking it to the Aegean and also to the Black Sea.

Perceived as an expansionist doctrine by outsiders, the *Mavi Vatan* concept, used as a shorthand expression for Ankara's maritime claims around its mainland, also represents a link to Turkey's deep existential insecurity. The discovery of large deposits of natural gas off the coast of the Island of Cyprus and attempts at utilizing it without Turkish or Turkish Cypriot involvement seemed to be the immediate trigger of Turkey's recent rhetorical upsurge regarding the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰⁶ However, Cem Gürdeniz, former Turkish Rear Admiral who came up with the concept, argues that it represents two pillars: "The first is intended to indicate Turkish areas of maritime jurisdiction under national sovereignty, such as territorial waters, the continental shelf, and the EEZ, while the second was intended to create a maritime worldview for Turkey."¹⁰⁷

In other words, although the Mediterranean crisis is most often boiled down to Turkey's claims for maritime borders and hydrocarbon deposits, it is more about a wider security thinking and culture that has been taking shape over the last decade. As discussed before, there are two main components of this security policy. The first component is about the fear of being under attack or being circled by the outside powers. As one of our interviewees argues, Turkey perceives "a belligerent coalition of UEA, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan is being formed and backed by Israel, France and Greece to counter Turkey's influence in the region".¹⁰⁸ However, being aware of its lack of allies and encirclement, "Turkey now depends more on its military and becomes more proactive" to counter such an attempt. Turkey's perceived threat of encirclement by outside actors is also present in the conflict between Greece and Turkey, specifically with regard to the status of Cyprus, the militarization of the Aegean islands by Greece, and the delimitation of the EEZ in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkish strategic thinking would not allow the possibility of control over the Eastern Mediterranean and/or Cyprus by the same (hostile) country controlling its access to open seas through the Aegean. The involvement of Western countries – specifically France and the US – in the dispute only adds to Turkey's concern of being left alone by its Western allies in the region in a way that directly threatens its national interests.

The second component is about the regional ambitions of Turkey. The Mediterranean has been transformed into a region of vital importance, with a recent return of great power competition to project power in the Levant region and North Africa. Indeed, Africa as a whole has become one of the foreign policy priorities for many regional powers, including but not limited to Russia. Establishing a presence in the Mediterranean, in other words, is seen as not only a necessary to become an influential actor in the regional politics, but it is almost crucial to have a foothold in Africa. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey has been trying to establish itself as an important defense and trade partner of Africa, "which is not just a reflection of political and economic expectation, but also deep cultural ties".¹⁰⁹

Turkey's presence in Libya and its maritime deal should be seen in this light. Turkey has been backing the Tripoli government, which put them at odds with many countries, including Russia and France. In November 2019, aiming to counter the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey and Libya signed a maritime deal demarcating an 18.6-nautical mile (35-kilometer) line that will form the maritime boundary between the two countries' respective exclusive economic zones,

¹⁰⁶ Gingeras, R. (2020). "Blue homeland: The heated politics behind Turkey's new maritime strategy". *War on the Rocks*, June 2, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/>.

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Areteos, E. (2020). "Mavi Vatan and forward defense: The sinuous journey of a republican and imperial hybridization". *University of Nicosia Diplomatic Academy*, <https://www.unic.ac.cy/da/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2020/07/Mavi-Vatan-and-Forward-Defence-Evangelos-Areteos.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ Online interview with a Turkish expert within the international think-tank community, Berlin, September 2020; Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Turkey-Africa Relations", <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-africa-relations.en.mfa>.

which created an intense reaction from Greece as it cut its plans to link up with the Greek Cypriot controlled Cyprus Republic's EEZ claim. As Turkey's ally, the Government of National Accord (GNA), began to lose ground in Libya, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey approved Turkish military support to the GNA government in January 2020, and military deployments began soon after, which tilted the scales in favor of GNA in a short time.

More than anything, the Libyan conflict showed the level of militarization of the foreign policy culture of Turkey and its willingness to use military means, even in regions that are not traditionally seen as within Turkey's sphere of influence. According to one of our expert interviewees, this is a disruption strategy aiming not to establish the rules of the game, but to destroy it. He argued "what Turkey does is basically putting up a disruptive strategy that tells others that 'your plan will not work unless I am a part of it as well'. So recently, despite the rhetoric and much posturing of grandiose Turkish foreign policy premises about being under siege. Turkey moved with its forward defense strategy and the idea of solving the problems in their sources".¹¹⁰

A balancing strategy was also visible later as the developments unraveled on the ground in Libya. As Russia's presence also increased concomitant to Turkey's, this allowed Turkey to present itself as a balancer of Russia in the Mediterranean. An addition to its similar role in the Black Sea, thus aiming to get US support to limit the presence and influence of Russia and France, which strongly supports Greek position in the Eastern Mediterranean and, in cooperation with Egypt, UAE and Greece, opposes Turkish presence in Libya. In the end, a limited US tilt towards Turkey in its position regarding Libya allowed the latter to accuse France and its allies of upholding Russia's position and allowing it to create a military presence in Western Mediterranean which would directly threaten European security interests.

Balance of Turkey's Balancing Act: "Make Turkey Great Again"

A group of mainly non-Turkish and a small number of Turkish scholars and commentators have suggested that Turkey is "leaving the West," and is orienting its policy toward the anti-Western world, aspiring to become the leader of a Muslim bloc. In this vision, Turkey is thought to be increasingly following an "Islamist" foreign policy and positioning itself to act as an "order setting agent" based on its shared historical, cultural and religious ties to the Middle East and Balkans, dating back to the Ottoman Empire.¹¹¹ In contrast to this "shift of axis theory", some scholars have opted for what can be labelled as "autonomy theory", suggesting that Turkey's new foreign policy stems more from popular nationalism and independent foreign policy behavior than from a shifting of ideological or bloc affiliation.¹¹² The debate also has a domestic dimension with regards to what values should Turkey prioritize domestically.

This report has already demonstrated that the major driving force behind Turkey's foreign policy actions stems from multiple factors and is actually more complicated than an either/or type explanation. Rather than a dichotomic understanding of Turkish foreign policy, this report has focused on how changing threat perceptions and opportunity structures have shaped Turkish foreign policy in its immediate neighborhoods. It also showed that Turkish foreign policy exhibits features that rest both the nationalist and religious understandings of political events. The choice of discourse and strategy depend on the issue at hand, and its practical implications on the timing. For example, as one of our interviewees argued, "Erdoğan thinks that him being Muslim is in a way important for a broad population in the Middle East. He has no problem of linking his desire to stay in power with

¹¹⁰ Online interview with an Ankara based Turkish expert from the research institute community. August 2020; Online interview with an Ankara based Turkish expert within the think-tank community, August 2020.

¹¹¹ Akkoyunlu, K., Nicolaïdis, K. and K. Öktem (2013). *The Western Condition: Turkey, the US and the EU in the New Middle East*. Oxford, SEESOX Book Series on Current Affairs.

¹¹² Kennedy, R. and M. Dickenson (2013). "Turkish foreign policy and public opinion in the AKP era". *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 9 (2): 172.

a global mission for the Muslim world.”¹¹³ But at the same time, the discourse has strong nationalist undertones. According to one interviewee, “Turkey’s policies for the regions nearby are motivated more than anything by a vision for the future to become an exceptional country in the region and having material and political supremacy. It rests on the idea of an autonomous, powerful Turkey.”¹¹⁴

In fact, what is common in both discourses is a grand narrative of “Turkey rising”. As we discussed in the first section, the narrative is that Turkey is (and ought to be) not only a regional power, but also a central power. In order to achieve that, as the narrative goes, Turkey can only rely on itself and should refuse to play traditional roles that assigned to it by its Western allies. One participant in the webinar organized to obtain wider perspectives from academics and experts for this report, argued that “Turkey now sees itself as a country in the league of France, UK and even the US” and acts as if it is a major power. The perception of being under siege from external actors and having an ambition to achieve a greater role, both regionally and globally, creates counter alliances and acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy by strengthening Turkey’s isolation (or lack of allies). The political elites then react to this isolation through ever changing transactional alliances, informed by the “Turkey rising” grand narrative. In fact, this narrative is what holds together competing political blocs of Turkey, which then plays tremendous role in domestic political consolidation. In the next section, we will discuss whether the capacity of Turkey corresponds to this grand narrative.

¹¹³ Online interview with a Berlin based German expert within the research institution community, August 2020

¹¹⁴ Online interview with an Ankara based Turkish expert within the think-tank community, August 2020.

SECTION III: PROJECTING INFLUENCE BEYOND BORDERS: CAPACITY VS. AMBITION

Various policy lines and the ambitions of current Turkish foreign policy and security strategy have put a heavy demand on Turkish economy and other sources of power. The question of whether Turkey has enough resources to realize these ambitions and policies beyond its borders remain unanswered, though it is quite clear that it is already on the verge of reaching its economic and attention limits due to several military/security commitments on seven external fronts (Northern Iraq, Northern Syria, Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, Gulf region, Somalia, Azerbaijan) and the domestic component of the fight against terror. Although concerns about Turkey's overextension beyond its capacity are mentioned in private, there is no public discussion over the issue due to the non-permissive nationalist rhetoric through which these operations have been presented to the public. Nevertheless, this section will look at the capacity vs. ambition equilibrium in terms of tangible and intangible sources of power in Turkey. Tangible factors here refer to economic strength and military capabilities, while intangible factors mainly indicate the quality of the decision-making system, strength of alliance/partnership structures, and domestic support.

The Discourse on Ambitions

The message given to the Turkish public and international actors through public statements from Turkish decision makers is clear: Turkey is determined in its moves and will not concede, even under extreme pressure. This message is supplemented with an extensive use of coercive diplomacy and frequent declarations of red lines. Any conciliatory moves and diplomatic bargaining possibilities are preempted with extreme nationalist rhetoric, which makes it harder to engage in such acts and it takes time to prepare the public for such a move when the developments necessitate them. For example, in a public statement on September 5, 2020, President Erdoğan warned Turkey's counterparts: "We hope it won't be too late when they realize that there is no power that can stand in front of a nation, which sees the struggle as well as its possible consequence -the martyrdom- as the biggest honor. We, as Turkey and the Turkish nation, are prepared for any possibility and any outcome."¹¹⁵

This hyperbolic statement reflects the regular usage of such rhetoric and the mixing of nationalist sentiments with religious compassion. President Erdoğan usually initially uses such rhetoric on a given issue in one of his public speeches, during which he frequently addresses unnamed and unspecified "foreign enemies" of the country. Other actors -whether directly related to foreign policy arena or not- then replicate his messages and align with the President's rhetoric, although usually without directly accusing other world leaders of wrongdoing. Some experts argue that this happens because there is no available counter-narrative in Turkey as the government has almost full control of the press and thus the general public have little knowledge or ability to follow what happens.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/trpresidency/status/1302252392201756672>

¹¹⁶ Online interview with a Turkish expert within the international think-tank community, Berlin, September 2020.

Moreover, the Turkish public is not knowledgeable enough about the daily occurrences in international arena and there is a general lack of public correctives. The leaders of the country can therefore afford to be overly ambitious in their declarations and finally achieve perhaps only 10 percent of their declared goal – but nevertheless get away with it without losing face. The connection between the stated ambitions and the public consequences of failing to achieve them is almost non-existent, unless the opposition parties make them an issue over a prolonged period, but this rarely happens. This almost immunity from public scrutiny allows President Erdoğan – and sometimes other players in the foreign and security milieu – a flexibility that is rarely accorded. When dealing with adverse developments, Erdoğan can reverse his position, explain to his audience why he did this using similar nationalist rhetoric, and still have the approval of his core constituency.

Some of our interviewees argued that, benefiting from the above flexibility in public appreciation, the underlying thinking behind the frequent bold pronouncement and sharp positions has been to start with a maximalist position and later settle with whatever you can get.¹¹⁷ A good example of this strategy is the Peace Spring Operation which was conducted on 9-17 October 2019 in Aleppo, Hasakah and Raqqah in northern Syria with the aim to drive out PYD forces from these towns close to the Turkish border. Before the operation started and while it was being conducted, Turkish policy makers argued that the aims were to (a) neutralize the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG and the ISIS in the region to provide security and stability along Turkey's border, and b) to establish a 30 km deep and 480 km long safe zone along Turkey's border to provide security for Turkey and a safe haven for Syrian refugees residing in Turkey.¹¹⁸ In the end, Turkey had to settle with control over the territory between the towns of Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ain, stretching along the strategic M4 highway in the south, without actually attaining neither goals publicly declared. Nevertheless, support from the government's core constituency was not particularly diminished as a result.¹¹⁹

Some of our interviewees close to the government argued that such government positions are not maximalist, but in fact accurately reflect its real intentions. They also maintain that “the President's statements must be taken seriously, especially whenever he makes his intentions clear. Hence, Turkey's interlocutors would be unwise to take his statements as a bluff”.¹²⁰ If we accept these pronouncements as true, then the gap between the declared aims and results gives us the difference between Turkey's capacity and that of its government's ambitions. Seen from this perspective, the gap between the statements and achieved results indeed reflects the limits of Turkey's abilities in international affairs.

On the other hand, such statements from the leadership could sometimes also be used as signals to other actors to indicate Turkey's long-term direction, if not immediate goal. In Operation Peace Spring, for example, Turkey compromised from its earlier maximalist demands to settle as it did not wish to end up in an armed conflict with the US forces. However, one interviewee said “this does not mean that Turkey had entirely walked away from its original plan” and “The position is still there. The present situation is related to analysis of Turkey's capacity to achieve its demands at the current time and associated risks. When the situation changes in the future – if for example the US changes its position – Turkey will revert back to its original demands”.¹²¹ It then becomes very difficult for the general public and Turkey's international interlocutors to determine whether Turkey genuinely changed its position or just settled to a lesser goal temporarily, although some interviewees also argue that “the President Erdoğan is a rational actor who acts in the interest of his nation and should not be misread”.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Online interview with a leftist academic at a Turkish university, August 2020

¹¹⁸ <https://www.msb.gov.tr/en-US/Slide/12102019-04838>

¹¹⁹ Online interview with an Ankara based Turkish expert from the research institute community. August 2020.

¹²⁰ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020.

¹²¹ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020.

¹²² Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, September 2020.

Leadership and Decision-Making Capacity

There is little published insight regarding technicalities and intricacies of current decision-making process and the associated risks and opportunities of Turkey's capacity vs. ambitions.¹²³ Similarly, few details from the various phone conversations and direct talks President Erdoğan has with his global interlocutors, which has increasingly become his preferred mode in dealing with foreign leaders, are available. Public statements from the presidency on such talks are usually coached in hyperbolic national rhetoric and remain very general. Moreover, reporting on foreign policy issues has become increasingly scarce in Turkish media to the point that foreign policy pundits and analysts need to follow international news sources to gather timely information on developing situations.

Furthermore, the lack of institutionally declared national strategies on security and foreign policy and the highly centralized decision-making process practically results in a highly personalized, or at best very narrowly confined group, execution and implementation of foreign policy.¹²⁴ This was a widely shared perception among the foreign and security policy expert community we talked to during this project. In different ways and from different perspectives, almost all of the interviewees claim that both policy planning and following up on stated ambitions are done haphazardly by a small group of individuals. They also point to structural problems related to the presidential system and/or human resources capacity. Some argue that, as there is a concentration of power in the system, the decision-making and execution of policies falls short of democratic credentials and that it is very difficult to sustain such a system. They argue that the system may easily backfire if Turkey later finds itself with a weak government. Even with the current government, they argue, the diminishing of public support has become an observable problem, which sometimes lead to factionalism within the ruling elite.¹²⁵

The restricted access to decision makers and the government officials and them being closed to ideas from outside of their close circle acts as a constraint on Turkey's abilities. As a result of the erosion of the institutional weight of the Foreign Ministry, the country's policy making and practical policy responses have become less predictable. As the decision-making has now moved into the presidential palace, where the process is opaque and is influenced only by few people with selective input from the established policy institutions, the governing structure consists of same set of people, even on very different issues. To complicate matters further, one of our interviewees argued that, within the close circle of the decision-making elite, "there is place to only one type of adviser, which could easily be classified as 'yes-men'. The personalities in the inner circle are divided in two: On the one hand we encounter die-hard believers of the President, and on the other hand those who approve of what he says even if they don't believe it."¹²⁶

Under such conditions, the implementation of policy follows the governmental ambitions, rather than long-term calculated policy lines, which further complicates policy responses. As such, hastily implemented or not well-thought-out policies sometimes create new obstacles, rather than eliminating existing ones. For example, Turkey has provided military support to the UN-recognized Tripoli government in Libya from early January 2020 onwards.¹²⁷ This was handled more or less efficiently

¹²³ For an early analysis of the current presidential system decision making in foreign policy and security issues, see; Neset, S., Aydin, M., Bilgin, H., Gürçan, M., Strand, A. (2019). *Turkish foreign policy: structures and decision-making processes*. CMI Report. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6854-turkish-foreign-policy-structures-and-decision-making-processes> and Neset, S., Gürçan, M., Bilgin, H., Aydin, M., & Strand, A. (2019). *Turkey's international relations*. CMI Report. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6853-turkeys-international-relations>

¹²⁴ For a justification of the leadership diplomacy a government-oriented journal's article is useful, Murat Ulgül, "Personal Diplomacy and Turkish Foreign Policy", *Insight Turkey* Vol. 21 / No. 4 / 2019: 161-182. <https://www.insightturkey.com/file/1204/Erdoğan's-personal-diplomacy-and-turkish-foreign-policy>

¹²⁵ Online interview with a Turkish expert within the international think-tank community, Berlin, September 2020; Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, September 2020.

¹²⁶ Online interview with a Turkish expert within the international think-tank community, Berlin, September 2020.

¹²⁷ BBC, "Libya conflict: Turkish MPs approve bill to send troops", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50975494>

while the military conflict continued, but Turkey has been experiencing problems in switching to diplomacy since the situation on the ground moved into the political level. Some argue that this is because the policy planning process had not been thought through before the initiation of military support.¹²⁸ A similar situation can also be observed in the Eastern Mediterranean where Turkey has legitimate legal and political arguments, but the hyper-nationalization of these arguments make it difficult for Turkish actors to fully deliver on the promises of announced policy lines. One of our interviewees argued that “there is obviously a lot of policy planning taking place, but the problem is how accurate, realistic and proper this planning actually is”. According to him, this “has to do with how the institutions are functioning in Turkey”, and the gap between ambition and capacity is unavoidable “because you have a center of power, defining aims, goals and the limitations, and the rest of the institutions have to follow -or sometimes catch- up with policy implementations. Thus, there is no chance for proper policy planning and for working out a reliable strategy. Because the aims are not to be discussed and the capabilities have to fit into those aims, not tampered with reality, the chance for a realistic planning in Turkey today is rather low.”¹²⁹

The Economy

Economical support is another important aspect of Turkey achieving its stated foreign policy goals. Many of our interviewees indicated that this support has become a problem. However, they also found it difficult to foresee the extent to which the economic constraints would affect the foreign policy. According to the interviewees close to the government, the government has been trying to get the country’s economy into a position where it can absorb different kinds of shocks for a long time. However, many also claimed that the economy and financial sector are in a bad shape and that the institutions connected with the economy are acting under political constraints. Obviously, the economy might become a handicap for Turkey’s foreign and security policies if further weakened and it could obstruct the ambitions and robustness that has been witnessed in recent years. Our research clearly indicates to increasing economic difficulties for a highly assertive foreign policy.

Looking at recent economic figures, we can see that Turkish GDP peaked at 863,722 billion USD in 2016 and then dropped dramatically to 754,412 billion USD in 2019. Turkish GDP was 715,820 billion USD in 2020. It is estimated to be around 650 billion USD in 2020.¹³⁰ This indicates a drop of roughly 25% of GDP, which cannot be tolerated for a country whose ruling party’s main political agenda is based on sustainable economic growth. As of November 2020, the Turkish Lira (TL) was the most devaluated national currency in the world against the USD, dropping 30% against USD in 2020 only. Since then, the country went through a change of the Minister of Finance and Treasury and four cycles of change of the Governor of the Central Bank. While President Erdoğan expressed on November 10, 2020 that both the state and the nation are ready to accept bitter economic prescription to overcome economic hard times and promised general economic and judiciary reforms to be implemented in the coming days,¹³¹ these promised reforms came only in terms of yet again general promises on December 26 2020.¹³² President Erdoğan declared democratic and economic reforms 2nd of March 2021 to aid long-term economic recovery. Yet, just seventeen days after the announcement of government’s general reform intention on economy, the Governor of the Central Bank changed again, making it the 4th time in four years.

¹²⁸ Online interview with an Ankara based Turkish expert within the think-tank community, August 2020.

¹²⁹ Online interview with a Berlin based German expert within the research institution community, August 2020.

¹³⁰ <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/turkey#:~:text=The%20GDP%20figure%20in%202020,2019%2C%20when%20it%20was%20%249%2C151>

¹³¹ “Turkey’s Erdogan vows to win ‘trust’ of investors after lira plunge”, *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/fc0be85d-cba8-4172-9d38-d8b6f5fa0e8e>

¹³² “2021 to be year of reforms for Turkey, says Erdoğan”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/2021-to-be-year-of-reforms-for-turkey-says-erdogan-161163>

On the other hand, contrary to the decrease in GDP, military expenditure has increased 39.83% between 2015 and 2019, from 12.3 billion USD to 20.448 billion USD.¹³³ It is important to note that Turkey has conducted four significant military operations in Northern Syria and several cross-border security operations in Iraq since 2016. Those who have expertise on the Turkish military unanimously endorse the fact that the costs of these operations are enormously high and cause heavy burden on national economy, though they are not openly discussed inside the country. During the Operation Euphrates Shield against ISIL, for example, the Turkish Army lost an enforced tank company only in one-day and two special operations battalions literally melted down in the vicinity of Al Bab. The estimated cost of this infiltration raid alone is between 30 to 40 million USD in material lost.

Strength of Alliance/Partnership Structures

In its operations into Syria, Turkey was acting almost alone and could not get any political, security or operational support from its traditional Western partners. Although the White House made a dramatic shift in its Syrian policy on October 19 2019 to give Turkey the green light to conduct military operations against the US-backed Kurds in northern Syria, Turkey was highly criticized for its actions from both sides of the Atlantic.¹³⁴ However, as soon as the operation started, Washington again shifted towards limiting the extend of the operation and attempting to maintain previous US position in Syria. Here, it should be mentioned that the US, as of early February 2020, “halted long-standing military intelligence cooperation program with Turkey, which for years helped Ankara target PKK militants.”¹³⁵

Our interviewees reflect that Turkey now has “two very fragile alliances” – East and West – because of the way Turkey is doing politics, and this is resulting in limitation of political space for Turkey. Moreover, they argue that Turkey has too many simultaneous tensions with too many actors, both to the West and to the East, and there is no visible strategy to reduce these tensions. What is more interesting, when asked, the Turkish public do not favor Turkey taking the initiative and move -in a conciliatory way or otherwise- to solve its problematic relations with other countries (See Figure 7 below).

¹³³ See various database compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) regarding international military spending at <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988-2019%20as%20a%20share%20of%20GDP.pdf>; <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932019%20in%20local%20currency.pdf>; and <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932019%20in%20constant%20282018%29%20USD.pdf>.

¹³⁴ The shift was very clear in the White House statement: “Turkey will soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into Northern Syria. The United States Armed Forces will not support or be involved in the operation, and United States forces, having defeated the ISIS territorial ‘Caliphate’, will no longer be in the immediate area.” See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/>. President Trump also said that “Turkey’s operation in Syria is not our problem...They have a problem at a border. It’s not our border. We shouldn’t be losing lives over it.” See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50075703>. and <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-usa-idUSKBN1WZ01S>

¹³⁵ Pamuk, H. and P. Stewart (2020), “Exclusive: US halts secretive drone program with Turkey over Syria incursion”. *Reuters*, 5 February, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa-drone-exclusive-idUSKBN1ZZ1AB>

FIGURE 7: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR MENDING RELATIONS WITH OTHER COUNTRIES

COUNTRY	YES	NO	NO IDEA
USA	27,1	49,1	23,8
SAUDI ARABIA	19,9	54,3	25,8
UEA	19,6	53,1	27,3
EGYPT	19,2	55,8	25,0
SYRIA	19,0	55,9	25,1
ISRAEL	15,7	61,7	22,6
GREECE	15,4	59,7	24,9
CYPRUS	15,1	59,1	25,8
ARMENIA	11,7	62,6	25,7

Source: Aydin, M. et al. (2020), *Quantitative Research Report on Social-Political Trends in Turkey – 2019*. İstanbul, Kadir Has University & Akademetre, 15 January.

Over the last decade, Turkey has lost its ability to enlarge the scope of its partnerships and has weakened its existing alliances. This presents a stumbling block for implementing strategic moves. According to our interviewees close to the government, the decision makers are aware of this situation and address the issue through President Erdoğan's attempts at creating personal connections with important foreign leaders.¹³⁶ While this approach worked with the Trump Administration in the US, to some extent with Merkel in Germany and initially with Macron of France, it has been reversed in France, neutralized in Germany, and is doubtful to continue to work in post-Trump Washington. President Putin of Russia and President Erdoğan, however, seem to appreciate each other and be careful not to put one another in difficult positions at home. They are clearly aware of each other's boundaries and, though at times come very close to those lines, they do not cross them and end up in a difficult domestic political quicksand. While they occasionally push one another into a corner, so far they have been able to manage the complex relationship between the two countries and have exhibited an acute understanding of their differences – agreeing to disagree when they are not able to cooperate. The value that Turkey attach to this strategy was recently highlighted when Ibrahim Kalın, the presidential spokesperson and de-facto national security advisor of the President, suggested

¹³⁶ Online interview with a policy advisor to the President, August 2020. See also O. Matthews (2016), "Erdoğan and Putin reignite the bromance". *Politico*, 9 August <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-president-Erdoğan-and-russia-vladimir-putin-reignite-the-bromance-west-failed-putsch/>; and "Behind Trump's Turkish 'bromance': Lev Parnas, oligarchs and a lucrative lobbying deal", NBC, 19 September 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/behind-trump-s-turkish-bromance-lev-parnas-oligarchs-lucrative-lobbying-n1240374>.

in an interview that Turkey and the US could adopt a similar *modus operandi* in managing their troublesome relationship.¹³⁷

Russia is the only global power that has, to some extent, assisted Turkey in Syria in recent years. They have done this through opening Syrian airspace to Turkey during its operations, establishing de-escalation zones between Assad forces and armed opposition groups in and around Idlib, and finally formalizing Turkey's presence in Syria through the Astana Process and several MOUs signed between them. But even this picture swiftly and violently changed when Syrian jets with Russian consent bombarded a Turkish commando unit column advancing in M-4 highway in the Idlib region on February 27, 2020. In the days following this, Turkey conducted an extensive and successful drone operation against the Russian-supported Syrian regime's air defense systems. The technological capacity and the successes in the execution of Turkish Armed Forces against the Russian-made air defense systems, both boosted the Turkish public's morale and signaled to Russia and other powers the extent to which Turkey was willing to go when attacked directly. As a result, Turkey and Russia came a new understanding, signing a new protocol and in essence freezing the situation around Idlib.

The volume, severity, and success of Turkish retaliation against Syrian forces and the Russian made and operated-missile defense system also allowed Turkey to capitalize its gains against Russia in Libya and later in the Caucasus during the recent Armenia-Azerbaijan War over Nagorno-Karabakh, all of which has also impacted the way in which Turkey is perceived by its allies. But the general message to the Turkish public is quite clear: Turkey can only rely on its own forces for its security, and it needs to have power and willingness to use it to achieve international recognition.

Military Capacity as a Continuation of Politics

Turkey's current national security and foreign policy practices are mostly compatible with the classical Clausewitzian view of warfare.¹³⁸ The regions where Turkey faces strategic competition, either from its traditional partners or potential adversaries, extends peacetime diplomacy to armed conflicts. Hence, the division between war and peace can easily get blurry. For example, according to 2019 Activity Report of the Ministry of Defense, its "External Relations" program's budget was 166.414.000 TL (approx. 21.221.383 USD). But as of June 2020, the actual expenditure of this budget line exceeded 531.921.253 TL (67.822.683 USD).¹³⁹ The external relations budget of the Ministry of Defense has thus more than tripled in a very short time, which indicates that Turkey is actively participating in or pursuing assertive policy actions abroad. In addition, Turkey supported 10 countries in 2020 with "Peace Support and Peacekeeping Operations", which is expected to increase to 15 countries by 2023.

As Kasapoğlu indicates, Turkey gained a *marge de manœuvre* in Syria – and apparently beyond – as a result of its successful drone operation.¹⁴⁰ This ascended Turkey overnight to an important drone

¹³⁷ Hurriyet Daily News (March 08 2021). "Turkey, US can resolve issues through constructive dialogue, presidential spokesperson says" <https://www.hurriyettailynews.com/turkey-us-can-resolve-issues-through-constructive-dialogue-presidential-spokesperson-says-162979>

¹³⁸ Carl Von Clausewitz, Prussian general and theorist of war, describes the relationship of war to politics as "the continuation of policy by other means". To him war must always be subordinate to policy and serve as a means to a political end. He emphasized the crucial point of correlation between war and politics that "all wars can be considered as acts of policy". See Clausewitz, Carl von (1976). *On War*. Edited and translated by M. Howard and P. Paret. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

¹³⁹ Ministry of National Defence (2020). *2019 Faaliyet Raporu*. Ankara, MSB.

¹⁴⁰ Kasapoğlu, C. (2020). "Turkey's Drone Blitz Over Idlib". *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 18 (8), April 17, <https://jamestown.org/program/turkeys-drone-blitz-over-idlib/>; S. Roblin (2020). "Turkish Drones and Artillery Are Devastating Assad's Forces In Idlib Province- Here's Why". *Forbes*, 2 March, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastienroblin/2020/03/02/idlib-onslaught-turkish-drones-artillery-and-f-16s-just-destroyed-over-100-armored-vehicles-in-syria-and-downed-two-jets/?sh=6fb88ffc6cd3>; R. B. Urcosta (2020). "The Revolution in Drone Warfare; the Lessons from the Idlib De-Escalation Zone". *European Middle Eastern & African Affairs*. Fall: 50-65, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/31/2002487583/-1/-1/1/URCOSTA.PDF>.

power status.¹⁴¹ As a result of the drone operations conducted in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and over Nagorno Karabakh, Turkey has gained a name in military literature: “Reconnaissance Strike Complex a la Turca”.¹⁴² This was also acknowledged by the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliiev, when he claimed that during the 2nd Nagorno Karabakh War, the Azerbaijani Army used Turkish drones to destroy Armenian military equipment worth one billion USD.¹⁴³ With this new type of air warfare, Turkey has boosted its operational capacity, and gained both technological and political advantage in the international arena. It should be noted that Turkey is one of only twenty-two countries producing armed drones.¹⁴⁴ There is no doubt that in the coming years Turkish drone power will become a precious strategic tool in its foreign and security policies and will be used as leverage to transcend country’s other limitations in defense sector.

As a retired Turkish Special Forces officer indicated, the Turkish military gained a lot of tactical and operational experience from operations in Iraq, Syria, Libya and the Caucasus. As such, drone surveillance and sudden strikes to enemy positions seems to be becoming main military doctrine for the coming years.¹⁴⁵ The Turkish military also gained experience in training with friendly forces in operational areas. The result of these were observed in Syria and Libya, where “forces trained by Turkish trainers became a game changer in clashes.”¹⁴⁶ In the context of this report, it is possible to argue that the evolution in tactical and operational capacities of the Turkish Armed Forces would contribute to a further divergence from NATO’s sphere of influence, at least at the doctrinal level. For the first time since becoming a NATO member, the Turkish military staff now make a significant strategic contribution at doctrinal level. Hence, the NATO forces might even make use of Turkish military’s experience and update its concept as a result of Turkey’s know-how in drone warfare, training local fighters, joint and multi-layer operational techniques in urban warfare/counter insurgency with law enforcement agencies, and electronic warfare. Aside the US, no other NATO country has such a complex recent military experience in operational theatres.

The *Euphrates Shield Operation* in August 2016 and the *Olive Branch Operation* in January 2018 demonstrated Turkey’s ability to manage the centrifugal and centripetal forces with its effective political control on and use of its armed forces – in turn demonstrating that the country can plan, organize and apply joint armed operations.¹⁴⁷ This is despite approximately 40% of the commanding ranks and 59% of the general staff being discharged from the Turkish Armed Forces following the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. As a result of these mass dismissals, the number of generals/admirals in the Armed Forces dropped from 326 to 196 in July 2017 and 119 out of 1894 general staff officers were also discharged after the attempt. At the Armed Forces Command, 617 of the 921 (67%) general

141 In the days following the Idlib battle, Turkish defence analysts were not hesitant to use phrases such as “tactical game-changer”, “new military doctrine” and “unprecedented in modern military history” when discussing Turkey’s use of drones.” See S. Brownsword (2020). “Turkey’s unprecedented ascent to drone superpower status”. *Drone Wars*, 15 June, <https://dronewars.net/2020/06/15/turkeys-unprecedented-ascent-to-drone-superpower-status/>.

142 Mevlütoğlu, A. (2020). “Türkiye’nin Askeri Dönüşümünün Sahadaki Yansımaları”. *Perspektif Online*, 11 Temmuz, <https://www.perspektif.online/turkiyenin-askeri-donusumunun-sahadaki-yansimalari/>

143 See, *Savunma Sanayi*, 15 October 2020, <https://www.savunmasanayi.org/aliyev-turk-sihalari-sayesinde-1-milyar-dolarlik-ermeni-askeri-techizatini-imha-ettik/>.

144 “Who Has What: Countries Developing Armed Drones”, *New America*, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/world-drones/who-has-what-countries-developing-armed-drones/>

145 Davis, M. (2020). “Cheap Drones Versus Expensive Tanks: A Battlefield Game-Changer?” *RealClear Defence*, October 22, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/10/22/cheap_drones_versus_expensive_tanks_a_battlefield_game-changer_581536.html.

146 Mevlütoğlu (2020). “Türkiye’nin Askeri Dönüşümünün Sahadaki Yansımaları”.

147 “Centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces are concepts developed by Richard Hartshorne, referring to the unity of a state’s geographical territories and questions whether its political unity will continue in relation to them, which are in conflict with each other. Thus, these two powers need to be in an equilibrium with each other. Hartshorne claims that while the centrifugal forces create an impact that separate the society, the centripetal forces try to hold the society together. The centripetal forces are nationalism, powerful national leadership, and a government which is able to implement effective and productive economy and welfare state programs. The centrifugal forces are ethnic, racial and religious differences and conflicts, political corruption, bad economic performance, natural disasters or defeats in wars. Hartshorne, R. (1950). “The Functional Approach in Political Geography”. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 40 (2): 95-130.

staff officers were discharged, while in Air Forces Command, 295 of the 545 (55%) general staff officers and in the Naval Forces Command 207 of 428 (48%) general staff officers were discharged.¹⁴⁸ These figures indicate how successful the Turkish military was in implementing successive operations abroad, despite these discharges. It is also argued that the military operations have been used by political decision makers to eliminate the traumatic impacts of the discharges¹⁴⁹ and to balance the impacts of centrifugal and centripetal forces.

The cross-border operations also displayed Turkey's ability to fight against two different terrorist groups, namely ISIL and the PKK-PYD/YPG. Turkey was also able to support the Tripoli government in Libya against Khalifa Haftar forces, and Azerbaijani Armed Forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, while at the same time maintaining its watch over the Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus. Following the dramatic coup, this can be seen as over-ambitious for the Turkish Armed Forces, though nevertheless it was done more or less effectively.

Finally, Turkey has made strides in developing its national defense industry. This has been an ambition since the mid-1970s and was empowered by the government's recent emphasis on "local and national" (*Yerli ve Milli*) production. The Presidency of Defense Industries (*Savunma Sanayi Başkanlığı* - SSB), the responsible entity for Turkey's armament procurements and coordination of defense productions, was directly linked to the Presidency in 2018 with the changes in the governing system. Moreover, the government has prioritized several defense projects since 2010, though most of them had started much earlier, creating partnerships between state-owned defense companies -such as *Aselsan*, *TAI*, and *Roketsan*- and private companies to further push Turkish defense industry. The latest economic data shows seven Turkish defense companies are among the world's top 100 in revenue in 2020.¹⁵⁰ According to pro-government sources, these defense companies will in time realize Turkey's ambition to support its pivotal, autonomous and assertive foreign policy.

In the meantime, Turkey's relations with other NATO countries and its position within NATO has become a hot topic in Turkish domestic politics after the July 15 coup attempt. Turkey has been a loyal NATO member for decades. While the group behind the coup attempt declared its allegiance to NATO at the night of the attempt, the remaining military commanding structure after the attempt failed has shown a tendency towards a comparatively independent military posture from NATO. Further, a significant number of staff officers either commissioned at NATO Headquarters or at Turkish embassies abroad as military attaches have become renegades and sought asylum in various countries, thereby confirming, in the eyes of those remaining, their connection to the coup attempt.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, the Turkish Armed Forces is still considered to be a supportive force in Turkey for its NATO membership.

Intelligence: A New Dimension in Foreign Policy

Another noteworthy development in recent Turkish foreign policy structure has been taking place in the intelligence realm. At least three developments regarding the National Intelligence Organization (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı - MIT) indicate how its place in the country's foreign and security policies has shifted in recent years. First, with the transformation to the presidential system, the MIT is attached to the presidency and reports directly to the President. A new National Intelligence Coordination Board was established within the Presidency, this board is headed by the President and aims to oversee all of Turkey's intelligence activities. A presidential decree in 2018 allowed the

¹⁴⁸ *Anadolu News Agency*, 23 July 2017; *NTV*, 6 August 2018.

¹⁴⁹ "Number of Turkish generals decreases 40 percent with post-coup attempt dismissals", *Hurriyet Daily News*, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/number-of-turkish-generals-decreases-40-percent-with-post-coup-attempt-dismissals--115852>

¹⁵⁰ They are *Aselsan* with 2.290.610.000 USD, *TAI* with 2.266.790.000 USD, *BMC* with 679.590.000 USD, *Roketsan* with 515.180.000 USD, *STM* with 503.730.000 USD, *FNSS* with 374.940.000 USD, and *Havelsan* with 342.270.000 USD. See *Defence News*, <https://people.defensenews.com/top-100/>.

¹⁵¹ At the time of writing, 19 staff colonels commissioned at NATO Headquarters and 15 military attaches are still fugitives. See *Anadolu Agency*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/15-temmuz-darbe-girisimi/feotonun-firari-kurmaylari/1156429>.

MIT to gather intelligence on the armed forces and military personnel – a duty that was previously carried out by the Army Intelligence.

Second, a new type of intelligence activity –so-called “intelligence diplomacy”– was introduced in the 2018 Activity Report of the MIT. It is now common for the head of the MIT, Hakan Fidan, to accompany various delegations in official state visits with or without President Erdoğan. As President Erdoğan said, the organization is now able to “immediately intensify its activities wherever Turkey’s interests require a position to be taken. Thanks to our accomplishments in intelligence diplomacy, we can conduct our other works in a more powerful and determined manner.”¹⁵² Accordingly, Fidan has been actively engaging with almost every international crisis that Turkey has been involved in the last few years –from the Syrian civil war to the Libya crisis and the Nagorno Karabakh war. So much so that Erdoğan described the organization as a “game changer” in Libya.¹⁵³ It is also known that it has been playing a back-door diplomacy role in engaging with Syrian regime and the Egyptian government,¹⁵⁴ as well as with various Kurdish groups in the Middle East.

Third, as a result of its access to new drone and UAV technologies as well as local human intelligence, the MIT has also developed capacity in targeted assassinations. This is a type of operation only a handful of countries worldwide are able to conduct to a level of success, especially in Northern Iraq and the Northern Syria against high profile terrorists. Turkey has thus gained strategic advantages against terror organizations beyond its immediate borders, where these groups no longer create safe heavens and regroup after their infiltrations into Turkey.

Stability, Security and Recovery Programs

Turkey’s recent cross border and overseas military operations have exceeded the traditional meaning of defeating the combat capabilities of its adversaries. It could be argued that Turkey’s operations in Northern Syria, except in the Idlib region, have already turned into standard security operations, in which the Turkish security apparatus has gained tactical experience. Thus, beyond its military force and support operations, Turkey has transcended its power projection to neighboring territories with highly experienced and functional humanitarian and administrative organizations. With the establishment of the *Syrian Task Force* in Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay governorates, responsible for stability, security and recovery programs in Northern Syria, Turkey started its programs for reorganization of Free Syrian Army, local security forces, political governance and participation, humanitarian aid, social welfare, health, education, economic stability and infrastructure, as well as justice and social reconciliation.¹⁵⁵ Beyond this, the Turkish Postal Service (PTT) has been active since 2018 in these areas, providing mail, money transfers, and logistical services for Syrians and Turkish officials. In a similar fashion, the Turkish Ministry of Health has opened hospitals in the region, and the Turkish Red Crescent and the State Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (AFAD), along with several Turkish NGOs, have been providing relief to local populations.

Due to their nature, military operations are normally limited by time and scope, while substantive humanitarian and administrative operations last for much longer periods. People living in the so-called safe zones, encompassing Tel Abyad, Jarablus, and Afrin, and recently extending to parts of Idlib, are maintained by Turkish aid with security provided by Turkish supported local forces. Turkey’s stay in and contributions to these regions will eventually end, and the responsibility for security maintenance and civil administration will be passed on. However, there currently seems to be no time plan for this transition. In the meantime, the cost of these programs for Turkey is increasing and creating a

¹⁵² “MIT’in 2018 raporunda dikkat çeken ifadeler” (Flashpoints in MIT’s 2018 Report), *Hürriyet.com*, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/mitin-2018-raporunda-dikkat-cekten-ifadeler-41266643>.

¹⁵³ <https://bianet.org/english/politics/228070-Erdogan-turkey-s-intelligence-organization-has-been-a-game-changer-in-libya>.

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.cnnturk.com/video/turkiye/son-dakika-haberi-disisleri-bakani-cavusoglu-cnn-turkte-sorulari-yanitladi-video>.

¹⁵⁵ For details, see C. K. Demir and M. E. Pala (2020). *İstikrar ve Yeniden Yapılandırma Faaliyetlerinde Türkiye Örneği: Fırat Kalkanı ve Zeytin Dalı Harekât Bölgeleri*. Ankara, Jandarma ve Sahil Güvenlik Akademisi Başkanlığı, 87-142.

financial burden. The costs of arming and educating more than 40.000 Syrian National Army fighters, providing humanitarian aid (food, health, education and infrastructure) to almost 5 million people outside its borders, and providing other support activities necessitated by the everyday running of these regions are generating enormous burden for the Turkish economy. Although there are no openly available reliable figures to calculate the full economic cost of such a sustained long-term military and humanitarian operation in the region, and the Turkish government does not reveal figures, we can safely assume at least a billion USD has already been spent in the region. Moreover, the World Bank has calculated that the whole Syrian civil war has resulted in 1,5% decrease in Turkey's GDP,¹⁵⁶ while opposition parties, citing the cost of Syrian refugees in Turkey, put the cost of war to Turkey up to 50 billion USD.¹⁵⁷ This is bound to create problems for already troubled Turkish economy, and thus to its power projections abroad.

Our analysis shows that whether or not Turkey has enough resources to realize its assertive ambitions beyond its borders will be revealed in the very near future. However, even if the Turkish leadership is not able to fulfill its ambitions at the current stage, this would not mean that these ambitions won't be pursued at a later stage when Turkey is stronger and/or situations change and present new opportunities. With regards to Turkey's current abilities, our research indicates that the economy, the strength of alliance/partnership structures and stability as well as security and recovery programs weakens the country's capacity. Military power as a continuation of politics and intelligence as a new dimension in foreign policy, however, enhances the country's overall capacity in projecting influence beyond borders.

¹⁵⁶ See <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2016/ekonomi/iste-suriye-iraktaki-ic-savasin-turkiyeye-faturasi-1097643/>

¹⁵⁷ <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/suriye-ve-libyada-turkiyeyi-yiyip-bitiren-canavar-54985yy.htm>

CONCLUSIONS

Turkey as a Regional Security Actor

Frequent crises in international relations and abrupt shifts in Turkey's foreign policy outlook recently heightened the debate regarding Turkey's activist foreign policy. The debate particularly intensified after 2011 when political stability in the Middle East and the international system as a whole began to fluctuate. The changing dynamics of global politics, the transformation of the regional balance of power, the emergence of new actors, and the collapse of order in the Middle East following the Arab uprisings have allowed Turkey to push for more assertive foreign policy in its near abroad.

In an attempt to understand and map Turkey's current activist foreign policy with its pronounced role as a regional security actor, this report looked at deeper determinants and limitations of such policy. It highlighted perceptions of policy makers and their political allies about Turkey's needs, goals, limitations, and national role conceptions. It also looked into what drives decision makers in their activist foreign policy making.

The analysis showed that the Kurdish issue is still one of the primary drivers prompting the Turkish leaders to fulfill their goals – both domestically, regionally, and sometimes at the international level. Siege mentality and a general feeling of loneliness in international affairs are strongly held perceptions that feeds the understanding of regional and international situations among the leadership and the general public. The siege mentality has historical and geographical roots, whereas the feeling of loneliness is derived from the trust issues with Turkey's alliance partners. Both perceptions are being reinforced by the current rhetoric of the country's political leaders as well as acted upon in policy development and practice, thus creating a vicious circle of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Maintaining hold over domestic power is also viewed as an important driver for the current leadership. However, as our research demonstrates, assertive foreign policy actions, especially those with military involvement, do not always lead to an immediate enhanced domestic support. This is especially relevant in cases where the enemy image is unclear (despite strategic advantages). In cases where there is a clear and accepted enemy image, such as with the cross-border operations into Syria, the public displays a significant support, which usually comes as "rally around the flag effect" but does not translate into long-term voting behavior.

Ensuring economic development and securing foreign direct investment also continue to be important drivers of general Turkish policy. In this context, our analysis indicates that, although the political leaders are aware of the current economic problems of the country and try to get the country in a better position economically, the domestic political situation and some of its foreign policy endeavors constrain the process –especially in implementing structural reforms to build a resilient economic system. The structure of current political alliance between AKP and MHP, which in essence run against such reform program, is the most important impediment to the implementation of economic, legal and political reforms.

The report also showed that Turkey's assertive foreign policy, especially after the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, can better be understood in the context of its search for autonomous action in its neighborhood, with the ability to conduct cross border and overseas military operations without the support of its traditional allies. There is a generally accepted view that Turkish national security strategy has now moved to adapt a "Forward Defense" concept to "deal with the problems at their sources", even though this has not yet been codified into the official security/defense strategy papers. This fact might reflect the lack of a coherent national security strategy that could mitigate some of the tactical advantages achieved by Turkey in the mid to long term – including the tactical and operational experience and superiority in conflict areas in Syria and Libya and the experience of counter-terror operations in Iraq. The main hurdles thus seem to be the questions regarding Turkey's political stability, limited economic resources, and the lack of overall regional policy concept.

To overcome these shortcomings and also to support its search for autonomy in its foreign and security policies, Turkey has attempted to balance its relations between its traditional Western allies on the one hand and the Russian Federation on the other – as well as rebalancing the value of and the priority among the regions around it. As a result, "balancing major powers in international relations" have emerged as one of the consistently applied strategic behaviors of Turkish foreign policy in recent years. However, the use of balancing as a tool risks a) creating a dual dependency situation, characterized by a vulnerability to Russia and an increased need for assurances from the NATO against a resurgent Russia in the Black Sea and b) and increased transactionalism in Turkey's foreign relations with all sides which might, in the future, deprive Turkey from long-time alliances and partnerships. In fact, Turkey is already experiencing these risks in its foreign policy.

Finally, the following diagram is drawn to summarize the overall analysis framework of this report on Turkey's foreign policy, focusing on its role as a regional security actor. It displays the main content of the strategies that together make up the totality of Turkey's positioning as a regional security actor. The **National Role Conceptions** in the table are based on our analysis of how the government view the position of Turkey relative to other countries. **Goals** indicate to our analysis of the prioritized foreign policy goals of the leaders of Turkey in recent years. **Drivers** are the analysis of the issues, situations and perceptions that prompt the Turkish leadership to act towards fulfilling their chosen goals and national role conceptions. Analysis of **Actions** shows policy moves and/or tactics that have been taken, are being used, and will most likely be used in future in similar situations. **Constraints** illustrate our analysis of factors that could prevent the preferred options of the leaders to be taken or severely lower the quality of the chosen action towards obtaining stated goals.

FIGURE 8: TURKEY AS A SECURITY ACTOR – OVERALL FRAMEWORK



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This report analyzes Turkey's current foreign policy and its pronounced role as a regional security actor. It pinpoints deeper determinants and limitations of the policies that can be observed in different theatres of involvement. It identifies perceptions of policy makers and their political allies about Turkey's needs, goals, limitations, and national role conceptions as well as what drives decision makers in their choices. The report concludes with an overall framework for analysis in terms of Turkey as a regional security actor.

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