



Department of Political Science

Master's Degree in International Relations – Global Studies

Chair in Islam: culture and politics

Adventurism in the enlarged Mediterranean: the  
geopolitical impact of Turkey's strategic autonomy on  
Italian national interests.

Professor Francesca Maria Corrao

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SUPERVISOR

Professor Pasquale Ferrara

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CO-SUPERVISOR

Elettra Pelino

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CANDIDATE

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## Introduction

*“The power of accurate observation is commonly called cynicism by those who have not got it.”*

George Bernard Shaw<sup>1</sup>

The twenty-first century is witnessing a transition from a unipolar, Western-dominated international system to a multipolar order, with the hub of world politics and the economy increasingly shifting to the Pacific and new spheres of influence forming—namely the Sino-Russian strategic entente. As Cooley and Nexon (2020) exposed, in an unsettled geopolitical environment, “bottom-up” processes have also contributed to tectonic shifts in the balance of power, eroding the liberal ecosystem presided by the United States of America.<sup>2</sup> In fact, transnational political movements, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and non-Western international organizations<sup>3</sup> open up “exit options” from U.S. leadership. Hence, changes driven by high politics (strategic competition and conflict) and low politics (population dynamics), as well as “*the democratization of cyber capabilities worldwide*”<sup>4</sup> shape the current risk landscape.

According to the World Economic Forum (2020: 5), they will likely bring about the diffusion of hegemonic power as old alliance structures and global institutions are tested.<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, the Trump presidency (2016-2020) brought to completion the Obama doctrine of “partial retrenchment” (2009-2016), grounded in a more solvent approach to national security, better matching Washington’s chronically overambitious policy goals to its finite military and fiscal means.<sup>6</sup> Yet, unlike in the previous administration, multilateralism has been interpreted, rather than an instrument of benign hegemony of the United States, as the place *par excellence* of deceit by everyone else (Colombo and Magri, 2019).<sup>7</sup> Above all, in the elaboration and political rhetoric of the administration, there was no longer room for the old virtuous circle between hegemony and multilateralism. Hence, the most striking change introduced by the Trump

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, R.M. (2017) *Intelligence Analysis. A Target-Centric Approach*. Fifth Edition. CQ Press

<sup>2</sup> Cooley, A., Nexon, D. (2020) *Exit from Hegemony*. Oxford University Press

<sup>3</sup> I.e., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

<sup>4</sup> Garamone, J. (2018) Intel Chiefs Tell Senate Committee of Dangers to America. *US Dept of Defense* [Online]

<sup>5</sup> World Economic Forum (2020) *The Global Risks Report 2020* [Online]

<sup>6</sup> Unger, D. (2016) The Foreign Policy Legacy of Barack Obama. *The International Spectator* [Online] Vol. 51, no. 4

<sup>7</sup> Colombo, A., Magri, P. (2019) *La fine di un mondo. La deriva dell'ordine liberale* [Online] ISPI

administration resides in the unprecedented divorce between the United States and the international order that they had first set up and then continually expanded. Moreover, the post-national, liberal European integration project is in a profound crisis, with some member states openly challenging the values and principles underpinning the European Union (EU).

In the words of former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, ex-colonial countries and imperial legateses in world politics embraced a “*global political awakening*”.<sup>8</sup> Among these, Turkey’s aspirations to become a regional power – or better, a pivotal state<sup>9</sup> in the “post-Ottoman space” – found a suitable environment in the wake of U.S. failures, and particularly in the immediate aftermath of the Arab revolts. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reacted to the rapidly changing strategic environment with an effective slogan: “*Dünya beşten büyüktür* (The world is bigger than five)”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, he disputed the legitimacy of the global multilateral arrangements dominated by the UN Security Council and its five permanent members—the US, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France. Not only was he challenging the institutional arrangements that had formalized the distribution of global power at the end of World War II and the dominant position of the West in that world order—even though Turkey is a member of the transatlantic security system. He was also demanding that the premier league of power games recognize emerging powers such as Turkey as rightful participants.<sup>11</sup>

After the AKP (the “Justice and Development Party”) came to power in 2002, Erdoğan delivered a decade of record-breaking economic growth, boosting his popularity. In the 2011 parliamentary elections, 49.9 percent of the electorate supported his party, up from 34 percent in 2002.<sup>12</sup> The current triple crisis (currency, banking, and sovereign debt) notwithstanding, Turkey has outgrown the status of one-sided dependency on the European Union. Its economy amounts to \$761.8 billion as measured according to current prices<sup>13</sup>. This, together with a powerful army and navy, has endowed the country with increased regional influence. In light of

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<sup>8</sup> Brzezinski, Z. (2016) Towards a Global Realignment. *The American Interest* [Online] Vol. 11, Number 6

<sup>9</sup> A pivotal state is a fairly important regional power, also described as “a rising market”, through which the hegemon exerts regional influence. Öktem, K., Kadioğlu, A., Karlı, M. (2012) *Another Empire? A Decade of Turkey’s Foreign Policy Under the Justice and Development Party*. İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınlar, p. xvii

<sup>10</sup> Erdoğan, R.T. (2017) “The world is bigger than 5”. *The vision of New Turkey* [Online] Cumhurbaşkanlığı Yayınları

<sup>11</sup> Özel, S. (2019) At the End of the Day, Where Will Turkey Strand? *IAI* [Online] IAI Papers, 4, February 19, p. 9

<sup>12</sup> Cagaptay, S. (2020) *Erdogan’s Empire. Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*. I.B. Tauris, p. 175

<sup>13</sup> World Bank (2020) *Overview. Turkey* [Online] Oct 19



its 84 million citizens<sup>14</sup>, the geoeconomics of the Turkish population – the competitive potential at the international level – is very high. The country's large segment of young and educated population offers national and international investors a reactive workforce and a dynamic consumer home market.<sup>15</sup> Concurrently, Özel (2019: 3) believes that the relative weakening of the “West” and the rise of populism has created a void for Turkey in terms of its political referents. The construction of a regime dominated by a single party and the replacement of the Turkish parliamentary system with one concentrating virtually all political power in the presidency move Ankara closer to autocracy. Erdoğan has *de facto* turned into the most powerful Turkish leader in nearly a century. The Turkish authoritarian trajectory clarifies the country's transition from Kantian to Hobbesian foreign policy actor.

By virtue of its strategic geographical position between Europe and Asia, Turkey stands at the crossing point of world affairs. In 1997, Brzezinski had already focused on this aspect when he wrote “*Turkey, a post-imperial state still in the process of redefining its identity, is pulled in three directions: the modernists would like to see it become a European state and thus look to the west; the Islamists lean in the direction of the Middle East and a Muslim community and thus look to the south; and the historically minded nationalists see in the Turkic peoples of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia a new mission for a regionally dominant Turkey and thus look eastward. Each of these perspectives posits a different strategic axis, and the clash between them introduces for the first time since the Kemalist revolution a measure of uncertainty regarding Turkey's regional role*”.<sup>16</sup>

Turkey indeed qualifies as a border country in the enlarged Mediterranean and the junction of NATO's Eastern and Southern Flanks. It is the only country that can engage simultaneously with “the West and the Rest”, the North and the South. From the West, Turkey looks like an Eastern country. From the East, it resembles a Western country. This dynamic lies at the center of how Ankara views its role in global politics and relates with its neighbors. Thus, the multipolar vision in diplomacy is reflected in Erdoğan's constantly recalibrating his Western and Eurasianist ties to optimize the Turkish maneuver area, at times affiliating with one camp at the expense of the other. Given its location at the crossroad of two civilizations, the country

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<sup>14</sup> CIA.gov (2021) *The World Factbook. Turkey* [Online] January 19

<sup>15</sup> Giordano, A. (2013) *Turchia, popolazione, sviluppo: capitale umano e relazioni euro-mediterranee*. In: Boria, E., Leonardi, S., Palagiano, G., *La Turchia nello spazio euro-mediterraneo*. Edizioni Nuova Cultura

<sup>16</sup> Brzezinski, Z. (1997) *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. Basic Books, p. 134

is also the protagonist of contradictory and problematic processes of change and adaptation, within a boiling, polarized political and strategic context.<sup>17</sup>

In Nicholas Spykman's words, it seems that the 20th-century dictum "*Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; he who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world*"<sup>18</sup> continues to apply. In fact, the shifting political landscape characterizing the enlarged Mediterranean region, coupled with an ever-growing absence of the United States in the area, offers profitable opportunities for a plethora of actors to strengthen their respective regional positions. Great powers, such as Russia and China, have successfully penetrated the area, involved respectively in the Syrian and Libyan conflict and the completion of infrastructures.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, in May 2015, Chinese and Russian naval units undertook their first joint maneuvers in the Mediterranean as part of a long term-program in several operational theaters (Pastori, 2020). Among middle powers, Turkish assertiveness stands out. Conceiving its "near abroad" as its backyard, Turkey's Grand Strategy today is oriented toward two axes.<sup>20</sup> The first is the traditional, Ottoman one, stretching from the Balkans to Mesopotamia, from Vienna to Baghdad, that is, the two extreme poles of Ottoman expansion. The second, maritime and Kemalist, rediscovers the sea as conceptualized by the *Mavi Vatan* doctrine. It embraces the Suez Canal to gain ocean projection into the Indian Ocean via Bab el-Mandeb. Notably, Turkey has entered the traditional Italian spheres of influence, i.e., North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Balkans, some of the hubs of the "*Mediterraneo allargato*".

"*The crises of the Middle East and the enlarged Mediterranean region have acquired an increasingly central place in the agenda of the Security Council*" commented Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations in New York Mariangela Zappia.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the renewed strategic centrality of the Mediterranean requires a detailed analysis at a time of significant instability in the Mediterranean basin.

My interest in the topic stems from two valuable experiences. As an intern in the legal/counter-terrorism/Middle East areas of the Permanent Mission of Italy at the United Nations - New

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<sup>17</sup> Ferrara, P. (2014) *Bergoglio e la Turchia necessaria*. ISPI [Online] 27 novembre

<sup>18</sup> Spykman, N.J. (1944) *The Geography of the Peace*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, p. 43

<sup>19</sup> Pastori, D. (2020) *Who Controls the Rimland: Competition and Rivalry in the Mediterranean*. ISPI [Online] 17 July

<sup>20</sup> Youtube (2020a) *L'offensiva turca nel Mediterraneo. Ankara a Tripoli* [Online]

<sup>21</sup> ONUItalia.com (2020) *Zappia alla Camera: focus sulle crisi mediterranee e sul ruolo dell'ONU e dell'Italia* [Online] 06/11

York, I had the opportunity to enrich my academic background by following various dossiers concerning the enlarged Mediterranean area. Moreover, participating in the “Executive Course in Strategic Affairs” in collaboration with the Department of Information Security (DIS) of the Prime Minister’s Office enabled me to assimilate fundamental structured analytic techniques for intelligence analysis, such as the alternative futures analysis, which I have attempted to employ in this dissertation.

This thesis aims to offer a short-term, predictive analysis of Turkey’s geopolitical adventurism in the enlarged Mediterranean in light of the Italian strategic interests in the region and attempts to provide policy recommendations for Rome. I explore Turkish recent activism across several operational theaters (Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Libya) and examine Ankara’s international orientation toward traditional allies (NATO) and new partners (Russia). This work also delves into the increasing employment by Turkey of unconventional or hybrid weapons, i.e. migrants and maritime boundaries, to pursue its goals.

# Erdoğan's foreign policy vision: from Neo-Ottomanism to Realpolitik

*“Today, Turkey can launch an operation to protect its national security without seeking permission from anyone”*  
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan talking to members of Britain's Turkish community, late 2019<sup>22</sup>

## Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to investigate Turkey's current geopolitical stance, markedly oriented toward a muscular, pragmatic approach to increase its maneuver and pursue strategic autonomy in the international system. The first paragraph presents a profile of the country's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as an “anti-Atatürk Atatürk”. The author then offers a historical overview of Turkish foreign policy from the foundation of the Republic to the AKP (the “Justice and Development Party”) years and places emphasis on Erdoğan's vision of regional and global affairs, incorporating both continuity and change when compared to his Ottoman and Turkish predecessors. The subsequent paragraph is devoted to a thorough analysis of the Neo-Ottoman and Realpolitik foreign policy paradigms defining Turkey over the last decade (2010-2020). Finally, Turkish activism is contextualized in the ambiguous, present-day international structure, where small, middle, and regional powers are inclined to pursue hedging strategies rather than classical balancing methods to achieve security.

## **1. 1 The new Sultan**

Having won thirteen nationwide polls, securing power in the Republic over decades, Erdoğan emerges as the country's longest-serving leader, surpassing even Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who, in 1923, established modern Turkey out of the chrysalis of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the Great War (Cagaptay, 2020: xv). Under the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, Turkey was reduced to a rump state encompassing merely a third of its territory under the Ottomans. Interestingly, the end of Erdoğan's current term coincides just with the centenary of the proclamation of the Republic on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1923.

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<sup>22</sup> Pitel, L. (2020a) Recep Tayyip Erdogan's assertive foreign policy shakes international order. *Financial Times* [Online] January 27

### 1.1.1 From Empire to Republic

According to official Turkish historiography, the 1919–1923 War of Independence (also known as *Millî Mücadele*, “National Campaign”) represents the founding act of the Republic as a battlefield where the military value of General Mustafa Kemal and sense of national belonging of future Turkish citizens alike were attested.<sup>23</sup> The Armistice of Mudanya on October 11<sup>th</sup> put an end to the hostilities, but it was the Treaty of Lausanne – signed on July 24<sup>th</sup> – that gave international recognition to the present status of Turkey after the demise of the *Sublime Porte* (as the Ottoman government was referred to<sup>24</sup>) and affirmed it as a free, independent nation on a par with other powers, nullifying the Treaty of Sèvres. With the exception of the area of Alexandretta (Iskenderun), which was added in 1939 to the national territory, the territorial provisions of the treaty persist to the present day (Váli, 2019: 20). Turkey forfeited her rights to all Arab lands and Cyprus, whereas the Mesopotamian border remained undetermined until the Mosul area was at the end allocated to British-mandated Iraq. On its European border, the Lausanne treaty restored to Turkey Edirne’s railroad station on the western bank of the Maritsa (Meriç). In the Aegean, Greece retained all of the islands, exempting Imbros (Imroz) and Tenedos (Bozcaada), although Chios, Mytilene, Samos, and Icaria were to be demilitarized. The Dodecanese Islands, Rhodes, and the small island of Kastellorizo (Meis) were transferred to Italy. Moreover, in light of the murderous war, Greece and Turkey agreed on a compulsory exchange population between the Greeks (Orthodox Christians) in Turkey and the Turks (Muslims) in Greece, with an explicit exemption for the Greek minority who settled in Constantinople and the surrounding area before October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1918 and the Turks of Western Thrace. Following the dramatic transformation from a European, Middle Eastern, African, and Asian multicultural empire to a geographically and culturally vague Nation-State of “Turks”<sup>25</sup>, Turkey aspired to construe its image in the world. Many Turks developed a siege mentality under what is called the “Sèvres Syndrome”, a relevant element still marking Turkish strategic culture.<sup>26</sup> This search for self-definition was answered forcibly by Atatürk, who fully

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<sup>23</sup> Nocera, L. (2011) *La Turchia contemporanea. Dalla repubblica kemalista al governo dell’AKP*. Carocci editore, p. 15

<sup>24</sup> Váli, F. (2019) *Bridge across the Bosphorus*. Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 6

<sup>25</sup> In imperial times, those we commonly call Turks did not like to call themselves that, as the word “Turk” was perceived as a synonym for “foolish”. It was the Europeans who marked them like this, imposing a brand of permanent success, a mixture of contempt and fear, a Western sense of superiority and Islamophobia (Limes, 2016, *La Turchia secondo Erdoğan*, 10. L’Espresso SpA, p. 7)

<sup>26</sup> Phillips, D.L. (2017) *An Uncertain Ally: Turkey under Erdogan’s Dictatorship*. Routledge, p. vii

embraced the Ottoman project of Westernization<sup>27</sup>, expanding it to place the country on a trajectory that would lead to the great nation status that constituted Turkey's birthright. He founded the state-building process of the rising Nation-State on a radical, systematic modernization program aimed at breaking with its imperial past to elevate Turkish population at the level of contemporary civilizations. Therefore, Atatürk articulated the place of the Republic in the "modern" world—by which he explicitly referred to the European States, the great global powers of the interwar era, turning Turkey's back on its cultural roots in Asia and the Middle East (Lewis, 2002). Inspired by Western traditions, he established a secularist system mandating freedom from religion in government, politics, and education in line with the six arrows (*Altı Ok*) of Kemalism enshrined in the Turkish Constitution in 1937: Republicanism, Populism, Nationalism, Secularism, Statism, and Reformism. Accordingly, religious courts were abolished, the entire educational system was relocated under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Western codes of law were introduced, and Islam and other denominations were disestablished putting an end to the remnants of the *millet* system.<sup>28</sup> Turkey's founding father ran the country until he died in 1938, leaving behind a secularist legacy that İsmet İnönü – the country's second president – and his democratically elected successors maintained. Atatürk and his followers' confidence in the secularist character of Turkey was embedded in the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK). Ironically, the 1980 coup staged by the secularist generals allowed political Islam to spring. As a matter of fact, in view of the rise of the leftist ideology in the country and the developing civil war between left- and right-wing militia, the military ruled to allow limited, yet remarkable, forms of Islam to penetrate the country's political and education systems (Cagaptay, 2020: 4). The generals assumed that religion could hinder the ascending tide of leftist sentiment in the country, shielding the Turkish society from communism. In the 1980s and 1990s, this climate of crackdown increased Islam's visibility in the public sphere in the country and allowed Erdoğan, hailing from a tradition of political Islam, to recalibrate and dismantle Atatürk's secularism in just over a decade and turn Ankara's face to the Middle East, across Turkey's former Ottoman possessions. In doing so, he availed himself of the very tools that the country's founding elites provided him: the power of state institutions and top-down social engineering, both being

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<sup>27</sup> The Ottoman process of Westernization and social change, which began in the late eighteenth century, did not represent an attempt at Europeanization per se. Rather, the quest for reform was motivated by a desire to restore the Ottomans' hegemonic status through acquiring and mastering Western military and engineering arts in addition to establishing alliances in Europe. See Cagaptay, 2020: 9.

<sup>28</sup> In the Ottoman Empire, a *millet* was an autonomous self-governing ethnic or religious community, each organized under its own laws and headed by a religious leader, who was responsible to the central government for the fulfillment of duties, particularly those of paying taxes and maintaining internal security (Corrao, F., 2015, *Islam, religione e politica*. LUISS University Press, p. 208)

hallmarks of Atatürk's reforms. Following Atatürk's recipe of recasting the country in his own image – profoundly Islamic and socially conservative – Erdoğan may be depicted as an “anti-Atatürk Atatürk” (Cagaptay, 2020: 35). Turkey's democratic character is paradoxically intertwined with a great leader's perpetuation of power and stands in sharp contrast with the basic precept of Western democracy. The Kemalist experience, founded on a rigid, hyper-centralized state structure, reveals that people's sovereignty must inevitably be subordinated to that of the Nation, the latter guaranteed by an effective authority. As Atatürk put it, “sovereignty is not received, is taken” (*egemenlik verilmez, alınır*).<sup>29</sup> Erdoğan, too, remarkably pronounced, “Democracy is like a tram. You ride it until you arrive at your destination, then you step off.”<sup>30</sup> Mustafa Kemal is referred to as “Atatürk” because he provided the Turks with the homeland they had been deprived of. In the same way, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is “Tayyip Baba” because he protects them and challenges the present international system.

#### 1.1.2 An “anti-Atatürk Atatürk”. Erdoğan's rise

Erdoğan descends from a generation of Anatolian Turks, escaping the poverty of rural Turkey in an effort to improve their conditions in Istanbul. As part of his upbringing as a devout man, he completed his high education at Istanbul Imam Hatip School. However, the country's secularist education system regarded Imam Hatip schools as vocational schools, inhibiting their graduates from pursuing academic paths different than theology, leaving a scar of stigmatization in Erdoğan's mind and corroborating his will to fight against the political system. Having grown up in secularist Turkey and faced social exclusion at a young age due to his conservative views, Erdoğan engaged in politics in his hometown Istanbul in the 1970s. In 1994 he was elected Istanbul's mayor. Following the collapse of the Republic's traditionally secular parties during the country's disastrous 2000-2001 economic crisis, he came to power through his AKP, which emerged as the Turkish leading party in the November 2002 parliamentary elections. A self-declared moderate conservative movement, the AKP is rooted in the Welfare Party (RP), the cradle of political Islam in the Republic in the 1980s and the 1990s. Turkey's constitutional court outlawed the RP on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998 for violating the country's secularist constitution. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1997, the RP cadres instituted an alternative faction, the Virtue Party (FP), foreseeing the ban against the RP, but Turkey's High Court banned the latter on the same grounds as the RP in June 2001. Both the RP and FP are grounded in the National Outlook (*Millî Görüş*), a nativist and anti-Western movement that

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<sup>29</sup> Santoro, D. (2016) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, il capo che vorrebbe farsi califfo. In: Limes, *La Turchia secondo Erdoğan*, p. 33

<sup>30</sup> White, J. (2016) Democracy is Like a Tram. *Turkey Institute* [Online] 14 Jul

appeared in the country during the 1970s to which Erdoğan was a subscriber. Born in the Cold War milieu when the communist left and nationalist right provided the language for political conflict, the National Outlook portrayed the West (the ‘Judeo-Christian world’) as morally corrupt and antithetical to the Islamic polity. The National Outlook, expanding in tandem with the growth of political Islam across Muslim-majority countries, rejected leftist and rightist political movements alike as being alien and argued that Turkey’s salvation had to derive from the Islamic culture upon which Ottoman glory hinged. Erdoğan split from the FP and established his AKP on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Under his branding of it as a clean and center-right force, together with his suggestion that it respected secularism, a plethora of Turks at the time swung to his AKP, with a plurality abandoning the corrupted center-right DYP (the “True Path Party”) and ANAP (the “Motherland Party”) that had run Turkey nearly uninterrupted between 1950, when the DP (the “Democratic Party”) assumed power, and 2002. Presenting himself as a man of the people and a pro-Western modern Muslim, Erdoğan became prime minister in March 2003 and has won numerous elections since, above all because he delivered political stability and robust economic growth endowing the country with increased regional influence, especially during his first decade in power. Between 2000 and 2001, Turkey had suffered its worst economic crisis in modern history, with the economy shrinking by nearly 10 percent and unemployment jumping to an unprecedented 20 percent. Erdoğan boosted Turkish power by dramatically improving domestic living standards, and expanding economic, commercial, and cultural might in the Middle East and beyond. Notably, when the AKP head began to promote trade and the movement of people within the Middle East, Konya and Kayseri, as well as other inner Anatolian cities such as Malatya and Gaziantep – labeled “Anatolian Tigers” – took off economically (Cagaptay, 2020: 62). Thus, the country turned into a majority middle-class society, a historical first the CIA recognized in 2010 by classifying it as a developed economy. Much of the growth in the last decade originates from a strong export sector—Turkey now ranks second in the world, after the USA, in overall export of general TV dramas (Cagaptay, 2020: 62). Moreover, Ankara built soft power through its service sector, with the country’s flagship carrier, Turkish Airlines, being the main symbol of Turkey’s global outreach under Erdoğan. In 2002, just as the AKP rose to power, the airline serviced nearly 100 destinations, many of which were domestic routes. Today, they fly from Istanbul to over 300 routes, many of which in the Middle East, Africa, and Eurasia, helping spread Ankara’s political wings around the globe. Strong of its burgeoning economy, Ankara advertised its perceived influence in the region by also spearheading the “Shamgen Zone” project – through a fusion of the Arabic name for Syria and the EU’s Schengen Area – that would cover the Levant minus Israel (Cagaptay,



2020: 71) At current prices, Turkey's GDP per capita almost tripled between 2002 and 2019.<sup>31</sup> Anyway, this impetuous growth was far from linear, with ups and downs that reveal an unbalanced – and, often, dysfunctional – political and economic system.

Yet, throughout the early years of the last decade, Turkey's secularist military and high courts loyal to Atatürk's legacy restrained Erdoğan's political Islamist vision in government. Consequently, he played a double game, disassociating himself from political Islam and promising to transform Turkey's calcified politics, while embracing Islamic identity politics (Phillips, 2017: 22). After his second electoral win in parliamentary elections in 2007, and in front of his rising popularity – at the time, 46 percent of the electorate voted for the AKP, compared with 34 percent in 2002, constituting the country's largest electoral mandate in decades – he consolidated his power eroding democratic checks and balances. Between 2008 and 2011, he was able to take control of much of the media and the courts due to a 2010 referendum<sup>32</sup>, which gave him greater influence over the appointments of senior judges and prosecutors. Simultaneously, he targeted, delegitimized, and punished his secularist opponents, such as the TSK and a plurality of secular intellectuals, journalists, and civil society activists, propelled by the Gülen movement<sup>33</sup>, a powerful force of the Deep State (*derin devlet*)<sup>34</sup> that was his ally at the time. The referendum set the stage for national elections in 2011, where voters rewarded the AKP with 49.8 percent of the vote. Against the background of a series of kangaroo trials, the military's top leaders resigned *en masse*. Then, cracks emerged in Erdoğan's alliance with the Gülen movement, ushering in a long political fight that culminated in the 2016 failed coup against Erdoğan, in which Gülen-affiliated officers appear to have played a critical role. The AKP leader's personalization of power was met with growing resistance. In summer 2013, former supporters among the Turkish intelligentsia and

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<sup>31</sup> Pierini, M., Siccardi, F. (2021) Why the EU and the United States Should Rethink their Turkey Policies in 2021. *Carnegie Europe* [Online] January 21

<sup>32</sup> Choosing to ignore Erdoğan's incendiary language during the campaign, Brussels welcomed the referendum for boosting accountability and making it possible for coup plotters to be tried in civilian courts (White, 2016, p.26).

<sup>33</sup> Founded by Fehdullah Gülen and known as *Hizmet* ("Service") by his participants, it is a transnational religious and social movement, which campaigns for a tolerant Islam based on the principles of altruism, education, and hard work. Although the Gülen movement presents no formal structure, and no official hierarchy or membership, it developed into the world's largest Muslim network and a well-financed community. Erdoğan found common cause with Gülen to erode the secular bureaucracy and restore integrity and Muslim virtue in the Turkish government. Virtuous and devoted, Gülenists provided resources and infrastructure to support the AKP in exchange for ministerial and other high-ranking positions when the AKP came to power. See Santoro, 2020: 21.

<sup>34</sup> The term refers to a kind of parallel system of government in which unofficial or publicly unacknowledged individuals – from the military to the mafias, from intelligence to the police and the judiciary – are crucial in shaping and implementing state policy. Such heap in constant competition of more or less strong powers is self-legitimized by the need to protect the republic from democratic drifts, from liberalizing excesses and from the international cabals that would threaten its existence (Limes, 2016, Gli imperi non vivono due volte. In: *La Turchia secondo Erdoğan*, 10. L'Espresso SpA, p. 12).

international media zealously rallied behind the anti-Erdoğan, pro-democracy Gezi Park protests<sup>35</sup>, to which the Prime Minister defiantly responded by dismissing the protesters as vandals.<sup>36</sup> In 2014, he became Turkey's first popularly elected president by a convenient margin, with ambitions to magnify the powers of the previously more formal position. Exploiting the legal powers available to him in the post-2016 coup state of emergency, as well as a conspiracy-laden narrative characterizing the country as encircled by foreign and domestic enemies, Erdoğan achieved victory in two more key elections. First, a 2017 constitutional referendum to further expand his powers for another term, abolishing the office of prime minister and replacing the parliamentary system of government with a presidential one; second, a 2018 general election to assume those powers for another term until 2023.

Erdoğan is now head of state, head of government, head of the ruling AKP, *de facto* head of the Police (a national force in Turkey under the control of the Interior Ministry), and commander in chief of the TSK. In parallel, since the failed 2016 coup, Turkey remains an increasingly polarized country where the president and the governing AKP corroborated their monopoly on power and move to accelerate momentous – and to a great extent irreversible – changes in governance and society, such as the reinforcement of presidential and civilian control over the TSK, entailing high interservice rivalry and politicization of the officer corps.<sup>37</sup> In the footsteps of the Ottoman sultans, the current Turkish President sponsored the construction of Çamlica Mosque, the largest in the Republic, in the former Ottoman royal capital (Çagaptay, 2020: 1). Furthermore, in July 2020 he reconverted into a mosque the iconic Hagia Sophia, designated a museum under Atatürk.<sup>38</sup> These representational and political acts testify to Erdoğan's own vision: both a reaction to Kemalism and a conscious reassertion of Turkey's place as a Muslim and Middle Eastern power.

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<sup>35</sup> A rainbow coalition gathered in Istanbul's downtown Gezi Park to press for the protection of Istanbul's green areas and prevent the government from digging up the park to build a shopping mall instead. The movement, called "Taksim solidarity," included environmentalists, secular Turkish nationalists, anti-capitalist Muslims, Kurdish groups, non-political middle-class professionals, hard-line leftists, and LGBT activists. On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the Istanbul police cracked down on the protesters. In reaction to this, normally uninvolved citizens mobilized and further protests occurred throughout the country until the end of the summer. Erdoğan responded on May 30<sup>th</sup> with a bloody crackdown that was swiftly condemned by the international community. See Phillips, 2017: 36.

<sup>36</sup> Danforth, N. (2020) *The Outlook for Turkish Democracy: 2023 and Beyond* [Online] The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March, PN77

<sup>37</sup> Flanagan, S.J, Larrabee F.S., et al (2020) *Turkey's Nationalist Course. Implications for the U.S.–Turkish Strategic Partnership and the Turkish Army* [Online] RAND Corporation, p. xiv

<sup>38</sup> Al Jazeera (2020a) *Turkey's Erdogan visits Hagia Sophia after reversion to mosque* [Online] 19 Jul

## **1.2 Turkish foreign policy from the birth of the Republic to the AKP years. Continuity and change**

When compared with the foreign policies of his Ottoman and Turkish predecessors, Erdoğan's approach to global and regional affairs, characterized by a pronounced quest to seek greatness for Turkey, embodies continuity and change alike.

In an attempt to resurrect the empire's might, late sultans decided to emulate institutions of statecraft from European global powers. Since 1923, Turkish foreign policy has traditionally followed a path of Westernization and has aimed at achieving balance and maintaining the *status quo*<sup>39</sup> (CIDOB, 2011). Atatürk's foreign policy direction may be effectively condensed in "*Peace at home, peace abroad*" (Váli, 2019: 25) due to the concern to stress his country's genuine independence, sovereignty, and detachment from the regional politics of the Arab world, in stark contrast with the Ottoman administration's expansionist nature. During the Cold War, Ankara's *Weltanschauung* was informed by the perception of Turkey's vulnerability to Soviet expansionism and regional instability. The country served as a bulwark against the expansion of Soviet influence into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, as asserted by its participation in the Baghdad Pact.<sup>40</sup> The Turkish–American entente was then institutionalized in 1952 through Turkey's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which provided the alliance with its longest border with the Soviet Union. As a secular, pro-Western democracy, it epitomized a bridge to Muslim majority countries in Central Asia and had a moderating influence on Muslims in Europe. Also, as an early member of the Council of Europe (1949) and a founding member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1961), Ankara established itself as a legitimate member of the Western world. Following developments in international conjuncture, in 1959 it applied for association with the European Economic Community (EEC). After its acceptance by the Council of Ministers of the EEC, in 1963 it concluded an association, the Ankara Agreement, paving the way for a customs union in the 1990s. Turkey's elevation to a candidate for accession in the European Council of Helsinki in 1999 was favored by the red–green coalition victory in Germany one year earlier, and the momentum underlying Greek–Turkish

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<sup>39</sup> CIDOB (2011) *CIDOB International Yearbook 2011. Country Profile: Turkey* [Online] 07/2011

<sup>40</sup> It was an anti-communist defensive alliance formed in 1955 by Iraq, the United Kingdom, Pakistan and Iran in addition of Turkey. Although at first skeptical as to the efficiency of the Pact, Turkey eventually became actively involved in its development and worked to persuade Lebanon, Syria and Jordan to join the project, taking on what has been deemed by some as an extremely aggressive, and ultimately 'counterproductive' stance toward these countries. This posture corroborated a regional perception that Turkey was a tool of the Western world (Barrinha, A., 2016, *Out of Will or Out of Necessity? Turkey and the Middle East*. In: Piet, R., Simão, L., *Security in Shared Neighbourhoods. Foreign Policy of Russia, Turkey and the EU*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 121).

reconciliation after two successive earthquakes in Athens and Istanbul set off a sense of solidarity between the two societies. As the Cold War focus deviated from the Middle East toward Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia in the 1960s, Turkey assumed that it had more room of maneuver without compromising its allegiance to the Alliance. However, relations with Washington became much tenser, notably after the infamous Johnson letter, in which the U.S. President cautioned the Republic against invading Cyprus to avoid potential retaliation from Moscow, to which Washington would not be willing to respond. The Cyprus crisis proved to be the ultimate incentive for Ankara to rethink the bedrock of its foreign policy with the understanding that an exclusive commitment to its Western allies would confer Turkey very limited foreign-policy options in an evolving international system. Thus, despite maintaining a prevailing security-oriented approach as the general northern star of its foreign policy throughout the Cold War, Ankara tried to re-adjust its bilateral ties with the Arab world in order to overcome the failure of the Baghdad process. Furthermore, it was guided by the urgency to negotiate more favorable oil imports from the Middle East at a time of increasing energy dependence on the region after the 1970s oil crisis. As oil prices rose and Turkey's commercial balance deficit grew, it became paramount for the country to diversify its suppliers. Hence, besides Iraq, its traditional supplier, Ankara built closer relations with Libya and Iran. With the same objective of cultivating a more flexible foreign policy, Turkey pursued a rapprochement with the Soviet Union, especially in the economic field. In reaction to the 1980 coup, the European Community (EC) froze its relations with Ankara. This set the stage for the reinforcement of Turkey's diplomatic relations with the Muslim world, illustrated by the Turkish participation in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) at the presidential level. With the end of the bipolar world and Georgia acting as a buffer between Russia and Turkey, the most relevant *raison d'être* for the Republic's Western posture in foreign policy and national security threat for Turkey dissipated, bringing about an alteration in its geopolitical identity.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, Ankara's policy horizons broadened and shifted to a more independent role on the international stage, strengthening its regional presence in the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Its interactions with other Middle Eastern countries notwithstanding, Turkey was far from being seen as a regional power. Its involvement in the Middle East was related to the development of strong military and economic ties with Israel, which produced further skepticism from Arab states with respect to Turkey's real intentions in the region. Throughout the 1990s, two main exceptions to Ankara's weak involvement in the Middle East are worth mentioning. From 1996 to 1997, during the coalition government between the RP (the "Welfare

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<sup>41</sup> Aktürk, Ş (2017) Turkey's role in the Arab spring and the Syrian conflict. *Turkish Policy Quarterly* [Online] Volume 15 Number 4

Party”) and the DYP led by Necmettin Erbakan – the doyen of the National Outlook, through which Erdoğan entered politics – Turkey struggled to develop closer ties with its Muslim neighbors. However, the overall impact on Ankara’s foreign policy was inhibited by the strong influence of the military on the country’s external affairs, and its successful “post-modern” coup through the National Security Council (NSC) aimed at Erbakan’s government in February 1997. In the end, the crisis was solved by Erbakan’s decision to resign. Indeed, the TSK’s interference in Ankara’s domestic and foreign policy – a constant source of controversy in Turkey–EU relations – has been justified on the grounds of its role as the guardian of national unity, a defender of the Kemalist principles of modernization and preservation of secularism. In spite of the demise of Erbakan’s government, Turkish diplomacy remained engaged in the Middle East. İsmail Cem, foreign minister between 1997 and 2002, attempted to revitalize relations with Arab countries, such as Syria (in 2001), where tensions stemmed both from the Kurdish issue and land and water disputes between the two countries. Cem was particularly bold in defense of Palestinian rights although the opposite view was predominant among the military establishment. Nonetheless, these only constituted poor efforts in a decade defined by a pragmatic approach to the region where Turkey was mostly attentive to (a) the prevention of externalities from the regions’ political instability, (b) the management of its conflict against the PKK (the “Kurdistan Workers’ Party”) rebels, and (c) the deepening of relations with Israel.

If his predecessors folded Turkey under the West to revive its global influence, Erdoğan has revised an unorthodox model: his ambition lies in making the country great as a stand-alone power, intensifying its presence in the region and acquiring a more active international stance (Cagaptay, 2020: xvii). Strengthened by impressive economic growth, the AKP was capable of putting forward both a domestic and a foreign policy agenda endorsed by strong parliamentary majorities during consecutive terms, an exception in Turkey since 1961. Accordingly, it intended to outweigh Turkish dependency on the West by courting multiple alliances to preserve the balance of power in its region and keep optimal independence and leverage on the global and regional stage.<sup>42</sup>

Erdoğan’s foreign policy has not been monolithic. When he first came to office in 2003, he felt cornered by Turkey’s secularist establishment. Following the pattern of two-level games<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Walker, J. W. (2011) *Turkey's global strategy: introduction: the sources of Turkish grand strategy - 'strategic depth' and 'zero-problems' in context* [Online] IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) (SR007). LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

<sup>43</sup> Two-level game theory is a political model of international conflict resolution between state actors derived from game theory. Whether in multilateral negotiations or bilateral meetings, government leaders commonly conduct “two-level games” played concurrently at the domestic and the international level. From the two-level-games

(Putnam, 1988), he implemented a more tolerant, European reinterpretation of late-Kemalist foreign policy in order to placate domestic opposition and amplify areas of potential cooperation with Turkey's liberal circles. Since the "EU anchor" was perceived as a vital factor contributing to Turkish political stability, Helsinki had marked the beginning of a virtuous circle: in 2001, after the country's adoption of the "National Program for the Adoption of the Acquis" (NPAA), the constitutional reform packages necessary for harmonization with the *acquis communautaire* were inaugurated in spite of the controversies. These included the abolishment of the death penalty in peacetime or the elimination of laws restricting teaching and broadcasts in the Kurdish language. The interplay of Turkey's eagerness to incur the costs of adaptation to EU criteria and the EU's credibility resulted in a more democratic, inclusive, and pragmatic Turkey, deeply integrated into the European order.<sup>44</sup> In recognition of the AKP's attentiveness to economic and political reforms, the EU invited Turkey to start accession talks in 2005. EU officials praised the AKP as the first governing party since 1960 to oppose the military's interference in politics. In fact, Erdoğan's pursuit of EU membership was instrumental in undermining the institutions that guaranteed secular governance and extending Islamic rights under the shield of democracy.

This phase came to an end by 2011, after Erdoğan defanged the military, passed a series of laws placing the judiciary under his control, and began weakening his opponents. In parallel, the stalling of the European process has ushered in a more conflictive relation between Ankara and its Western neighbors. A non-unified Cyprus became a full member of the EU after the rejection of the UN-backed and Erdoğan-upheld Annan Plan by Greek Cypriots in 2004. The new conservative elites in Germany (Angela Merkel) and France (Nicolas Sarkozy) were far more cautious about Turkey's EU membership than their predecessors (Gerhard Schröder and Jacques Chirac). The European Council blocked a number of chapters of the negotiation in December 2006, and later France and Cyprus vetoed additional ones. In Turkey, political tensions were spiraling due to the AKP's political strategy of marginalizing political and social actors considered as a threat to the AKP's ideological project. The series of court cases – Ergenekon and Sledgehammer, among others – that ensued its sweeping victory in the 2007 general elections effectively altered the balance of power in Turkey (Soler i Lecha, 2019: 4). In fact, the more the AKP consolidated its power in Turkey, the less it had to rely on the EU

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perspective, executives are "chief negotiators" involved in some form of international negotiations for which they ultimately need to obtain domestic approval at the ratification stage. The latter serves as the critical link between the international and domestic level but it can be based on formal voting requirements or more informal ways of ratification, such as public approval ratings. Putnam, R. (1988) Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The logic of Two-Level Games. *International Organization* [Online] Vol. 42, No.3

<sup>44</sup> Soler i Lecha, E. (2019) EU-Turkey Relations. Mapping landmines and exploring alternative pathways. *FEPS* [Online] September 2019, p. 4

anchor. Turkish disillusionment with the EU also provided the AKP with leverage to pursue reforms more selectively, gauging the benefits of the reform process for itself in a political climate more and more captive to political tension and polarization. Moreover, the EU's economic crises and the Arab pro-democracy uprisings inculcated the idea that Turkey could play its own game, and that the EU needed Turkey more than the other way around.

No longer constrained by the secularists, Erdoğan embarked on an active neighborhood policy and launched a new set of initiatives toward the Middle East, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Black Sea with the purpose of reviving Turkey's Ottoman-era power. This shift is due to a confluence of international, regional, and domestic factors. At the international and regional levels of analysis, these factors comprise the political void left by the 1991 Gulf war and the 2003 war on Iraq, the renewed dynamics in the Kurdish question, and the deterioration of the Arab–Israeli conflict, especially after Operation Cast Lead in Gaza during 2008 and 2009. Moreover, they range from the decreasing influence of the EU on Turkish foreign policy, as well as the US by first aggravating Turkey's sensitivities on the Kurdish question in 2003–2007 and then diffusing them by cooperating with Turkey in the fight against the PKK. Domestically, while Turkish foreign policy was originally a prerogative of the military – traditionally cautious in the deployment of force projection abroad – and other state bureaucracies, the internal reforms have brought foreign policy under civilian control, with the legitimate mandate to exert Ankara's influence globally entrusted to the democratically elected government. An additional catalyst for this revival of Ottoman legacies in Turkish foreign policy agenda has been the growing business interests and regional dynamism prompted by the rise of the “Anatolian Tigers”, the Anatolian, pious Muslim *homines novi* competing with traditional Istanbul industrialists. This new rural socio-economic base – among the main supporters of the AKP – advocated further expansion into emerging Middle Eastern rather than European markets.<sup>45</sup>

### **1.3 Erdoğan's geopolitics**

#### **1.3.1 Strategic depth and Zero problems with neighbors: Neo-Ottomanism**

Nations born out of the disintegration of former empires, such as Turkey, tend to manifest a magnified sense of their acme. The Ottoman Empire sets itself apart as one of the most durable empires in history (1299–1922): its successful political and military organization was geared to constant warfare, conquest, and domination over foreign nations (Váli, 2019, p.2). The geographical configuration reached at its peak, under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566),

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<sup>45</sup> See Öktem, Kadioğlu, Karlı, 2016: xviii

covered the former Byzantine Empire's areas in Europe, Asia, and Africa. During his reign, Baghdad was captured and the Ottomans became a naval power in the Mediterranean, maintaining control of the North African shore to the border of Morocco. Exerting pressure in every direction through its maritime and overland commercial routes, the Ottoman Empire was at the core of East-West affairs for more than five centuries.

Erich Zürcher (2007, 9) underlined that Turkey can only be fully understood when its former imperial greatness is taken into account: therefore, the shared memory of Ottoman power resonates deeply with Turkish citizens, whose image is blurred by visions of the past and illusions of the present. Thus, contradicting perceptions of national greatness and vulnerability uniquely shape Turkey's geopolitical profile. Since the end of the Cold War, the neo-Ottomanist discourse has gained popularity among the traditionally conservative and Islamist parts of the Turkish political spectrum.<sup>46</sup> In fact, such a foreign policy trend had been in the making since former Turkish Prime Minister and President Turgüt Özal in the late 1980s and early 1990s, together with former Minister of Foreign Affairs Cem in the late 1990s. As Ömer Taşpınar (Tanrısever, 2018: 31) put it, *"Turkey, in this neo-Ottoman paradigm, does not pursue a neo-imperialist policy aimed at resurrecting the Ottoman Empire. Instead of imperial nostalgia, neo-Ottomanism is essentially about projecting Turkey's "soft power" – a bridge between East and West, a Muslim nation, a secular state, a democratic political system, and a capitalistic economic force. Like French Gaullism, it seeks Turkish "grandeur" and influence in foreign policy"*.

Former Professor of International Relations Ahmet Davutoğlu, who became Turkish Foreign Minister in 2009 and Prime Minister in 2014, elaborated the core elements of the discourse in a book titled *"Stratejik Derinlik"* (Strategic Depth, 2001). The "Strategic Depth" doctrine sought to reposition Turkey from the periphery of international relations to the center as a player sitting at the intersection of multiple regions by virtue of its historical legacy as "rightful" heir to the Ottoman Empire ("historical depth") and its location in geopolitical areas of influence (*jeopolitik hat*)<sup>47</sup>, extending well beyond the legal borders of the Republic (*hukukî sınır*) ("geographical depth"). Davutoğlu's grand strategy posits that Turkey possesses the privilege of being *"a country with a close land basin, the epicentre of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus, the centre of Eurasia in general and is in the middle of the Rimland*

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<sup>46</sup> Tanrısever, O. (2018) Discourses and Politics of Eurasianism in Turkey During the 2000s. In: Talbot, V., *Turkey: towards a Eurasian shift?* [Online] ISPI. Ledizioni LediPublishing, p. 26

<sup>47</sup> Santoro, D. (2015) Ascesa e caduta dell'egemonismo turco in Medio Oriente. *Limes* [Online] 8/10



*belt cutting across the Mediterranean to the Pacific.*”<sup>48</sup> Longing for a *Pax Ottomanica* in light of Turkey’s broad strategic outreach, Erdoğan was guided by a well-defined, self-confident mental map, traced in the triumphant speech after the victory of his party at the 2011 parliamentary elections, “*Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir*” (Walker, 2011: 7). In geographical terms, a Turkey true to its “civilizational self” spans from the Balkans to the Mashreq, placing a particular emphasis on Palestine. As a matter of fact, the AKP leader regularly fuels irredentist sentiment by questioning the Treaty of Lausanne – acclaimed by Atatürk as a major victory and steadily despised by Erdoğan – proposing geopolitical revisionism that he wishes to complete by the critical juncture of 2023. On September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016 he re-initiated a political debate on the agreement. In December 2017 he insinuated that “some details” in the Treaty of Lausanne were “unclear” and that there it was imperative to revisit them. He even displayed maps on Turkish television with the country’s current borders extending well beyond, into Greece, Bulgaria, Armenia, Iraq, and Syria.<sup>49</sup> With respect to religion, Turkey owns the potential to become a trans-regional power able to unify and lead the Muslim world. In his opening speech – permeated by nearly redeeming tones – at the OIC in April 2016, the AKP leader maintained that Turkey epitomizes the only hope for the Muslim world.<sup>50</sup> A profound connoisseur of history<sup>51</sup> – regarded as a source of legitimacy and revenge –, Erdoğan has Abdülhamid II at the center of his imagery. In September 2016, at a symposium commemorating Abdülhamid II’s birth, ranking member of the AKP and former speaker of the Turkish parliament Ismail Kahraman described the sultan’s reign “*as a mariner’s compass [for Turkey] to give us direction and enlighten our future*”.<sup>52</sup> Arguably, Abdülhamid stands out as one of the most controversial rulers among all thirty-six Ottoman sultans. Turkey’s Islamists hail him as *Ulu Hakan* (Sublime Khan)—the only sultan of the house of Osman to have made Islam a pillar of Ottoman identity. For Turkey’s secularists and Westernizers, Abdülhamid is *Kızıl Sultan* (Red Sultan) denounced for his autocracy, obscurantism and bloody suppression of Ottoman

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<sup>48</sup> Murinson, A. (2006) *The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy* [Online] Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 42, Issue 6 (November)

<sup>49</sup> Salhani, C. (2020) Is Erdogan out to undo the Treaty of Lausanne? *The Arab Weekly* [Online] Sunday 22/03

<sup>50</sup> Daily Sabah (2016) *President Erdoğan: Turkey only hope for Muslim world* [Online] 28/04

<sup>51</sup> Victories, defeats, conquests and massacres constantly resurface and take on meaning, to the point of guiding political action in the present, as shown by the coincidence between the constitutional referendum with which the then Turkish Prime Minister tried to undermine the Kemalist state and the thirtieth anniversary of the coup of 12 September 1980, or the decision to start Operation Euphrates Shield on the 500th anniversary of the battle of Marğ Dābiq. See Santoro, 2016: 38.

<sup>52</sup> Torbakov, I. (2018) Royal Role Models: Historical Revisionism in Russia and Turkey. *Eurasianet* [Online]

Armenians and infidels. The reign of Abdülhamid II (1876–1909) corresponds to the height of the crisis of the empire, with the Ottomans losing their Balkan and North African possessions. The “Red Sultan” (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al., 2020: 14) embodies defeat: he is a victim, just like Erdoğan, whose narrative is imbued with references to “the Enemy”. In fact, referring to “*Payitaht: Abdülhamid*”<sup>53</sup> (Capital City Abdülhamid) – a popular TV series broadcast on the national public broadcaster of Turkey TRT – the AKP head noted that “*the same schemes are carried out today in exactly the same manner. The West’s moves against us are the same. Only the era and the actors are different*” (Torbakov, 2018). Manipulating the sultan’s last years on the throne, *Payitaht* represents a classic example of historical revisionism. The series portrays Abdülhamid II as a virtuous leader trapped in a sprawling realm, encircled by the predatory European great powers engaging in their nefarious designs through the Ottoman Empire’s “fifth columnists”—liberal intellectuals, Zionists, and Freemasons. Unpatriotic Western proxies, the TV show appears to suggest, are to be held responsible for the empire’s disintegration. The architect of the “strategic depth” doctrine concluded, “*it has no chance to be peripheral, it is not a sideline country of the EU, NATO or Asia.*”<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, he inaugurated a versatile foreign policy paradigm in compliance with the goal of “zero problem with neighbors”, exposing his vision of Turkey as an “order setting agent” at the center of a geography stretching across the Balkans to the Middle East, drawn together by solid trade and diplomatic ties due to a shared historical, cultural and religious heritage dating back to the Ottoman Empire (Akkoyunlu, Nicolaïdis, and Öktem, 2013). Hence, Turkey promoted good neighborly relations, defined by dialogue and cooperation rather than confrontation and coercion, and prioritized its former Muslim space in the Middle East, such as Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Pursuant to Davutoğlu’s “rhythmic diplomacy”, Turkey has been the host of several international meetings – its unsuccessful attempt to host the 2020 Olympics falls into this category – and has appreciably accentuated its involvement in the activities of many international organizations, even those it is not a member of, such as the Arab League or the African Union (Barrinha, Bastos, 2016: 125).

The 2011 Arab revolts presented Ankara with the opportunity to reassert itself as an example of a successful Muslim democracy and power broker in regional crises.<sup>55</sup> Turkey could profit from the asymmetric, multipolar world in which it was engaging and began to act

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<sup>53</sup> The tv series is known in English as “The Last Emperor”.

<sup>54</sup> Davutoğlu, A. (2001) *Strategik Derinlik, Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Strategic Depth, Turkey's International Position). Kure Yayınları

<sup>55</sup> Taşpınar, O. (2012) Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria. *The Washington Quarterly* [Online] Vol. 35

like a “strategic medium power”. As a consequence, it bolstered trade and business links with Arab states, as well as Iran, lifted visa restrictions with neighboring countries, and even mediated some of the region’s most intricate disputes, i.e. between Syria and Israel, Israel<sup>56</sup> and Hamas, Fatah and Hamas, and Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup> Emblematic is the case of Egypt, the cornerstone of Turkish foreign policy in the Arab world. When Erdoğan visited Cairo in September 2011, after the revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ihwān*) acclaimed him as a hero. The undeclared objective of his lap of honor was to “instruct” the leadership of the Brotherhood on what to do once in power, inducing Cairo to gravitate into the Turkish orbit in face of the Saudi’s hostility toward the *Ihwān* and U.S. ambiguity. Turkey considered itself and was considered as a potentially hegemonic actor in the Middle East and, consequently, a power with inevitably global aspirations. The full extent of its Neo-Ottoman ambitions has been especially visible through its engagement in the Syrian civil war after 2011, when the soft-power approach turned into proxy policies and an increasingly hard-power strategy to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Asad.<sup>58</sup> Ankara seemed to have the keys to Syria.

However, because of the deterioration of the regional context, a series of miscalculations about the Arab uprisings and the problematic Syria policy, Turkey lost its leverage in the region with international observers renaming Davutoğlu’s notorious slogan “*zero neighbors without problems*”.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the coup d’état of July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 that ousted President Mohamed Morsi from power caused the most serious crisis in relations between Ankara and Cairo since the 1930s. Erdoğan, who has always been accustomed to personalize international relations, burned his bridges with the military regime in Egypt, quarreled with Gulf monarchies for refusing to side with Morsi, and accused Israel of masterminding the deposition. He also inaugurated an

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<sup>56</sup> Hamas military-wing leader Khaled Mashaal’s visit to in 2006 suggested the coming rupture in Turkish-Israeli ties over Hamas and Gaza with the “Flotilla Incident”. In 2010, six civilian aid ships titled the “Gaza Freedom Flotilla” left Turkey and Greece loaded with humanitarian aid and construction materials, trying to breach the Israeli and Egyptian blockade of the Gaza strip. Israeli commandos stormed the ships crewed by Turkish non-governmental organization representatives in international waters. Of the six, the Turkish *Mavi Marmara* resisted and violent clashes broke out immediately. The ambush caused the killing by the Israeli forces of ten Turkish citizens. With harsh wounds inflicted by both sides, the boats were then forced to anchor in Israel. In the aftermath, Ankara froze its diplomatic relations with Israel, which followed suit. Importantly, bilateral military cooperation – the bedrock of the relationship – was downgraded. On a private phone conversation between Erdoğan and Netanyahu in 2013, the latter made amends and offered \$20 million in compensation. The negotiations, brokered by Obama, led to an agreement to return ambassadors, eventually finalized in 2016. Nonetheless, bilateral intelligence and Turkish–Israeli military ties never fully recovered. (See Cagaptay, 2020, p. 101-102)

<sup>57</sup> Zalewski, P. (2013) How Turkey Went from ‘Zero Problems’ to Zero Friends. *Foreign Policy* [Online] 22/08

<sup>58</sup> Manhoff, T. (2017) Turkey’s Foreign Policy Toward Syria. From Neo-Ottoman Adventurism to Neo-Ottoman Realpolitik. *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and al-Nahrain Center* [Online]

<sup>59</sup> Ferrara, P. (2015a) Problems inside and out, *Longitude* [Online] #51 p. 65.

alignment with Qatar – the only Middle Eastern state with which Turkey does not have sour relations – in what has now been conceived of as a "win-win" policy for both: Turkish military support to the small emirate on the one hand, Qatari capital flowing into Turkey on the other.<sup>60</sup>

Most importantly, the Syrian conflict proved to be a litmus test for Davutoğlu's foreign policy vision. As disclosed in an International Crisis Group (ICG) report, "*regionally, the Syrian conflict symbolises how Turkey's "zero problem" policy has become a "multiple problems" strategy*" (2013, i). Far from removing the Alawite regime of al-Asad and favoring the establishment of a Sunni government in Damascus, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu's Syrian strategy produced catastrophic consequences. These include: two million refugees; \$6 billion spent on assistance to Syrian "guests" (to which must be added 11.5 billion in lost exports and tourist income); the closure of Middle Eastern trade routes; the collapse of the Turkish–Syrian border and the transformation of Syria into a "confederation of terrorist organizations"<sup>61</sup>; the total devastation of the country's social, economic and state structure. In addition, it precipitated Turkey into domestic turmoil, with a series of terrorist attacks between 2015 and 2016 directed mainly against targets in the major cities of Ankara and Istanbul. Finally, the democratizer Erdoğan has come to be commonly considered, at least by Western media, a post-modern dictator at the head of a corrupt system that has gagged the media and the opposition in order to cement the influence of his clique (Santoro, 2015).

In conclusion, Turkey's ambition to convert into a champion of the Arab–Islamic awakening was thwarted by the tortuous turn taken by the above-mentioned political transitions (restoration of the previous regime and state failure). The fatal mistake committed by the neo-Ottoman leadership was not the attempt to rediscover and enhance the legacy of Osman I's successors, but the inability to resolve the contradiction between this effort and the regional alienation generated by (post-) Kemalist geopolitics. The ease with which Saudi Arabia put an end to the brief government experience of the Muslim Brotherhood and the effective

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<sup>60</sup> Turkey intensified links with Qatar in the 2010s. Both countries endorse political Islamist groups, including the Ikhwan in Egypt, Hamas in Gaza, as well as Brotherhood-affiliated groups in Syria and Libya. The Turkish–Qatari friendship solidified after Turkey stood by Qatar in a GCC dispute in 2017, when Erdoğan denounced the Saudi-led coalition's blockade of Qatar, contending that the isolation imposed on Doha was inhumane and contradicted Islamic values. He then established an air bridge to Doha when Riyadh and its allies severed ties with Qatar, allowing much needed supplies to be flown in. This allowed Qatar to endure the initial shock of hard sanctions applied by its neighbors. Eventually, in November 2017, the Turkish President opened a Turkish military base in Qatar, putting Ankara informally in charge of protecting Doha. See Cagaptay, 2020: 178.

<sup>61</sup> The war also strengthened the position of Kurdish groups in Northern Syria that were affiliated to the PKK, raising the specter for Ankara of a hostile Kurdish self-rule area just across the border to its south. Haugom, L. (2019) Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan: A change in international orientation? *Comparative Strategies* [Online] 38:3, p. 213

determination with which Iran managed to shore up the al-Asad regime demonstrates that the gap between Ankara and the two "historic" regional players are still far from being filled. In such a way, the “zero problems with neighbors” policy unveiled two relevant limits. First, the lack of coherence between Turkish targets and capabilities in a context of instability, particularly visible when the Turkish government aimed to solve long-standing conflicts of the Middle East, where many superpowers had been unsuccessful. As a January 2010 Wikileaks cable of American diplomats summarized, “*Turkey has Rolls Royce ambitions but Rover resources*” (Öktem, Kadioğlu, et al., 2009: xxi). Second, Turkey’s objectives could not be accomplished through the strength of its will alone – even if its capabilities were sufficient – owing to the fact there has always been a regional and an international dimension to Turkish moves. Envisaging the risks of Turkey’s complete alienation internationally, Erdoğan abruptly removed Davutoğlu in May 2016<sup>62</sup>, launching an initiative to normalize ties with some of its neighbors, including Iraq and Israel, and also to reconcile with historic rivals Russia and Iran, particularly as these two gained control over the end game in the war in Syria since 2015. These considerations compelled Turkey to shift its agenda from hegemonic goals to pragmatic security demands.<sup>63</sup>

### 1.3.2 The geopolitical awakening of July 15. Realpolitik

On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016, a rebellious faction of the TSK organized in the “Peace at Home Council” carried out a relatively calculated, but hastily implemented, coup attempt, made up of synchronized air and ground attacks in Istanbul and Ankara, coupled with a commando raid to capture or murder Erdoğan and, ultimately, reinstate democracy. The Turkish President was vacationing in Marmaris and by the time mutinous soldiers arrived at his hotel to arrest him he was already on his way to the Dalaman Airport. High-ranking TSK members were arrested. Assisted by F-16 fighter jets, the plotters occupied the army headquarters, and succeeded in bombing and seizing the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA). They also targeted media. *TRT*, one of the least-watched national television channels, went dark. Still, serious mistakes were made: the plotters did not arrest or assassinate Erdoğan and then Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım; failed to close all media, including social media, with confusing images being broadcast online by both supporters and opponents; did not present someone as the face of the rebellion with an assurance that order would be restored; notably, lacked military, domestic political or popular support—even opposition parties, the CHP (the “Republican’s People

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<sup>62</sup> Davutoğlu withstood Erdoğan’s efforts to accumulate power in the presidency, fearing it would disintegrate Turkey’s democracy. They also had diverging views on Islam’s role in governance. See Phillips, 2017: 28.

<sup>63</sup> Ferrara, P. (2015b) Turkey’s twist and turn. *Longitude* [Online] #55, p. 69

Party”) and HDP (the “Peoples’ Democratic Party”) issued statement against the coup (Phillips, 2017: 168). At three in the morning, Erdoğan addressed the nation using FaceTime – ironically, a social media application that he had sought to silence – and invited people to take on the streets in defense of the country’s democracy. Upon his return to Istanbul, he accused Fethullah Gülen of directing the coup. Through the state of emergency applied shortly thereafter and extended with Parliament’s consent seven times for three-month intervals, the AKP government closed civil society outlets and hastened its massive crackdown and systematic purges of alleged Gülenists from government institutions. As of July 2017, he seized assets worth \$11 billion of some 1,000 companies associated with the movement and its followers (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al, 2020: 17). In the end, the coup was a victory for Erdoğan who could aptly neutralize the opposition and justify measures increasing his grip on power, and, according to conspiracy theories – always prevalent in the country – the President himself was behind the coup.

Internationally, the deterioration in Turkey’s relations with its Western partners proceeded swiftly and received a nearly fatal blow when both official and unofficial Turkey found their stance and reaction to the attempted coup inadequate. The halted process for Turkish membership in the European Union looms large in the background.<sup>64</sup> Even worse, the general public blamed Washington for actively supporting the coup on the grounds of historical precedent and because the assumed mastermind of the uprising, Gülen, resided in the United States. Further enfeebling U.S.–Turkish relations, Erdoğan reprimanded the Obama administration for refusing to extradite Gülen.<sup>65</sup> Besides, there is growing perception in political circles in Turkey that the country is treated as a formal but not full member of NATO, as demonstrated by U.S. disengagement from the region after the Iraq operation, and the Obama administration’s reluctance to get involved in Syria. Instead, Russian President Vladimir Putin reached out to the Turkish leader in the immediate aftermath of the failed coup to show support and solidarity, epitomizing a marked rapprochement with Eastern powers, first and foremost Moscow. The Eurasian vision, that is, disengagement from the Transatlantic Alliance and pursuit of deeper cooperation with Russia, Iran, and other major powers to address Turkey’s security challenges more effectively, has gained momentum in political and academic circles, particularly after the U.S. decision in May 2017 to distribute heavy weapons to Syria’s

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<sup>64</sup> The crackdown following the Gezi protests, the purges and detention after the July coup attempt, and the erosion of the separation of powers with the entry into force of the presidential system in 2017 are among the many elements that raised concerns among large segments of the population in the EU. In November 2017 the European Council deliberated to cut Turkey’s pre-accession funds and two years later the European Parliament urged to suspend the negotiation process. See Soler I Lecha, 2019: 5.

<sup>65</sup> See Özel, 2019: 10.

People's Protection Units (YPG)—the Syrian Kurdish militant group, whose political arm, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), is aligned with Turkey's arch-nemesis, the PKK. As Sıtkı Egeli (2019, p. 82) argued, the deep trauma following the botched coup led to “[...] *the consequent shift in Ankara's threat perceptions. The survival of Turkey's regime and its top leader was now at stake, and Turkey could not count on traditional allies anymore. [...] The turn of events during the coup had shown that the main danger to Turkey's rulers came from the air, and exposed the need to immediately resurrect effective air defenses over critical targets [...]. Conveniently enough, Russia, [which] had helped the Turkish government during the botched coup, was gracious enough to offer the world's most capable long-range air defense system. From this perspective, if the purchase of S-400s risked straining relations with NATO and the U.S., then that was a price [the] Turkish leadership was ready to pay*”.

The forced departure of Prime Minister Davutoğlu and, in particular, the attempted coup d'état of July 2016 accelerated significant changes in Turkish foreign policy, namely the prioritization of national security, a self-confident style in policy implementation, a predilection for transaction-based relations based on expediency, and a quest for more strategic autonomy (Haugom, 2019: 206). Accordingly, geo-strategic, economic, and energy interests have become paramount drivers of Ankara's external action (Talbot, 2018: 7). Learning from the Arab uprisings experience, Erdoğan does not distinguish anymore between the United States, Russia, China, Iran, or Saudi Arabia: he has no allies, only objectives. In his first speech in parliament on May 24, 2016, Prime Minister Yıldırım declared Turkey's new *Realpolitik* approach of "More friends, fewer enemies", directly linked with Turkey's position, stronger and isolated from both its Western allies and Russia.<sup>66</sup>

Between 2015 and 2016, the Turkish presidential staff and military leaders developed a new security concept that places emphasis on prevention and preemption in order to better neutralize emerging threats. As Erdoğan stated in a speech in January 2016, “*Instead of playing defense, as Turkey had been doing up until very recently, in the future, Turkey will take preemptive and preventive measures designed to forestall threats before they can get underway*” (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al, 2020: 39). Thus, Ankara has devoted much effort to the interconnected goals of containing regional unrest and combatting the enemies of the Turkish state at home and abroad. The latter category includes a number of organizations defined as

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<sup>66</sup> Pelino, E. (2018) The 2018 Turkish military operation in northern Syria: Turkey's ambiguous *Realpolitik* between the USA and Russia. *Istituto di Alti Studi in Geopolitica e Scienze Ausiliarie* [Online] I report dell'ISAG, 114, p. 7

terrorist groups by the Turkish government, including the PKK<sup>67</sup>, ISIS, the Gülen movement (FETO), and the People's Revolutionary Party/Front (DHKP/C). The current stress on security concerns contrasts sharply with the amicable policy underlying the Davutoğlu era (Haugom, 2019: 215). In fact, Ankara's foreign policy activism at the time relied on a wide reach and was related to a number of different issues. Today, the image of Turkey as a regional leader, facilitator, and political-cultural model for other Muslim nations has been debunked in favor of more narrowly defined national priorities, often couched in security terms. Erdoğan's foreign policy vision shares regional great-power ambitions with that of Davutoğlu's. However, the moderate Islamism and notions of *umma* that characterized the Davutoğlu period have been wedded to a nationalist outlook where Turkey and its national interests are at the front and center. In this perspective, Turkey continues to finance the construction of mosques across the globe, from Asia, Africa, to Europe, and Latin America—with the Turkish President himself often officiating the opening ceremonies.<sup>68</sup> Issues that were previously framed as political or religious are now securitized, thereby legitimizing the application of extraordinary means to manage them. The increase in nationalist sentiments among Turkish citizens might have fortified the hardline nationalist policy from the Turkish government, in particular as regards the struggle against the PKK. Against this background, as the author will explore in Chapter 2, Ankara has engaged in the re-setting of its foreign policy objectives toward Syria to tackle the Kurdish issue since mid-2016.

Thus, Erdoğan is currently pursuing a more self-reliant balancing strategy, in an effort to leave open options that will best propel his consolidation of power and Turkish national interests. This foresees embracing a “precious loneliness” in taking principled stands to secure what he perceives as core values and interests, and acting unilaterally and with military force when core national interests are at stake. In fact, Ankara did conduct military operations abroad in the 2000s, but they were either undertaken under the aegis of NATO or the United Nations or were limited to cross-border operations against the PKK and its bases in Northern Iraq. Its new self-awareness as a significant actor and residual great power dreams suggest that rather than being a passive instrument of Western power projection in the Middle East, Turkey can and will disagree on key foreign policy issues with the West. Its recent activism in Libya and

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<sup>67</sup>As an official statement by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs reads, “*The PKK is listed as a terrorist organization internationally by numerous countries, including the members of the European Union and others such as United States, Canada and Australia. European Union also designated PKK as a terrorist entity in 2004. North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) also refers to PKK as a terrorist entity.*” Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d.-a), *PKK* [Online] One must also consider that only Ankara designated the YPG as a terror entity as early as 2014. See Cagaptay, 2020: 109.

<sup>68</sup> Maziad, M., Sotiriadis, J. (2020) Turkey's Dangerous New Exports: Pan-Islamist, Neo-Ottoman Visions and Regional Instability. *Middle East Institute* [Online] April 21



controversial energy exploration off the coast of Cyprus – that the author will delve into in Chapter 3 – has raised many questions and security concerns in other countries in the region and in Western powers. To sum up, Erdoğan has not completely given up on the West – he remains overall conscious that Turkey’s NATO membership and EU accession prospects still amount to relevant assets to ensure its security<sup>69</sup> – but appears to hope that his balancing efforts will inspire favorable policy changes.

Moved both by the ambition to rise to the role of autonomous global power and by specific geopolitical, security, and energy interests, Ankara has pushed itself to play a variety of games on very different tables. As one pro-government columnist commented, “*The Turkish geopolitical power axis is now felt from the Persian Gulf to North Africa and the Red Sea, from the Balkans to the Caucasus and Central Asia*” (Pierini, 2020a). Correspondingly, the Turkish President has pivoted to new areas beyond its near abroad region in the Middle East to compensate his losses there, and to attain Turkish influence elsewhere—this time with some successes, most notably in East Africa, as well as the Balkans, Black Sea Basin and Central Asia, i.e. the “Bayram Belt”. Moreover, he has forged new ties with Russia and China.

During the coronavirus pandemic (Pierini, 2020a), Turkey has been swift to put into action cooperative, aid diplomacy alongside its assertive foreign policy, delivering medical supplies to countries and regions selected for a variety of strategic ends—whether to cultivate stable ties (as with Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom), attempt to win favors (as with the United States) or champion geopolitical interests (as with the Western Balkans and various African partners). Taking advantage of adaptive industry, especially within the defense sector, and availing itself of its long-haul military cargo planes, Turkey was able to promote these deliveries to 116 countries through carefully choreographed diplomatic ceremonies in contemplation of its positioning as an alternative to China for supplying medical equipment and supplies to European countries.

Erdoğan’s bold foreign policy statements come at a time when he is faced with domestic economic turmoil and the rise of ambitious political opponents. While confirming itself as the country’s leading political force in the 2019 spring local elections, the AKP’s defeat in Ankara and Istanbul represents a wake-up call for the ruling party. As a matter of fact, on June 23<sup>rd</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> The post-2017 environment saw Erdoğan’s endeavors to repair Ankara’s links with Europe, highlighting the importance of the deep financial and economic links that tie Turkey to the ‘Strategic West’ — i.e. the collective membership of NATO and of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). A resource-poor country, Turkey depends on the Strategic West to grow in terms of trade and incoming investment. See Cagaptay, 2020: xx. Importantly, the diversification of partners in defense but not in economy renders Turkey economically vulnerable (Pitel, 2020a).

mayoral elections were held again in Istanbul after the Supreme Electoral Commission had approved the AKP's request to cancel the previous elections held on March 31<sup>st</sup> for alleged irregularities. Along the lines of the previous one, the new consultation – whose rationale was questioned by the EU – saw the victory of Ekrem İmamoğlu (54.21% of preferences compared to 48.8% of the March elections), candidate of the National Alliance made up of the CHP and the *İyi Parti* (the “Good Party”) against Yıldırım (44.99% of the preferences compared to 48.55% in the March elections), exponent of the People's Alliance formed by the AKP and the MHP (the “Nationalist Movement Party”).<sup>70</sup> The Kurdish component was decisive for this victory: the electorate of the HDP, a progressive pro-Kurdish force that did not present its own candidate, also contributed to the victory of the opposition candidate, inviting its base to vote for İmamoğlu.

The loss of Istanbul holds above all a symbolic value for Erdoğan who, before the defeat, had repeatedly declared thanks to twenty-five years of Islamist leadership in the city on the shores of the Bosphorus, “*whoever wins Istanbul wins the whole country*” (ISPI, 2019). Furthermore, the city is the beating economic heart of Turkey – in 2017, Istanbul totaled 31.2% of the national GDP – and its roughly 10 and a half million registered voters amount to over one-sixth of the country. Over the past two decades, the popularity of the AKP in Istanbul, as well as in numerous other municipalities, has stemmed from its ability to provide services to citizens: in particular, Istanbul has been the scene of unprecedented infrastructural growth and modernization. However, the economic recession that began in the last quarter of 2018, accompanied by high rates of unemployment and inflation, undermined the previous role of service provider and corroded the consensus for the party and the government. Another important indicator of the changing climate in the appreciation of the President's policy and his management of the AKP is represented by the resignation from the party of former Prime Minister and Minister of Economy Ali Babacan in early July. Underlining the differences of principle and values with the party line as well as the need for a new vision on the future of Turkey that responds to the needs of the next generations, Babacan laid the foundations of his new political commitment. Many argue that a party under the leadership of Babacan, an internationally respected figure, might be able to erode the traditional AKP consensus base. After having harshly criticized some moves by the central government, former Prime Minister Davutoğlu, for whom Erdoğan issued a request for expulsion from the AKP in early September, also founded his GP (the “Future Party”).

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<sup>70</sup> ISPI (2019) *Mediterraneo allargato* [Online] 11, Settembre

The economic sector is undoubtedly the litmus test of growing presidential assertiveness. In particular, the recent ousting of the governor of the Turkish central bank by presidential decree caused intensive discussion. Murat Uysal, head of the Central Bank since July 2019, was replaced in November 2020 by former Finance Minister Naci Ağbal after the Turkish lira hit record lows, losing 30 percent of its value since the start of the year.<sup>71</sup> Erdoğan had appointed then-Deputy Governor Uysal to head the central bank in July 2019 when he sacked his predecessor Murat Çetinkaya. It is likely that the choice was determined by a divergence regarding the high interest rates in Turkey – repeatedly defined by Erdoğan as "the origin of all evil" – which Çetinkaya was reluctant to lower. The opposition heavily criticized the move on the grounds that this compromised the impartiality and independence of the central bank. Turkey's new central bank governor has vowed to rebuild the nation's depleted foreign exchange reserves, as he heralded a sharp change in direction after two years of a highly contentious currency intervention policy.<sup>72</sup>

A presidential decree has also been issued which strengthens the role of the Ministry of the Treasury and Finance, which can now invest directly in local and international companies or establish partnerships under the presidency's instruction, without the decree specifying further criteria for the choice of companies of these investments.

Finally, at the root of a certain discontent with the AKP is the question of Syrian refugees. The reception of Syrians – today more than 4 million<sup>73</sup> – has been a policy of Erdoğan's government since the beginning of the civil war in neighboring Syria. A feeling of hostility and intolerance toward them began to spread in the country, especially in conjunction with the economic crisis and the growing difficulties of Turkish citizens. This wave of discontent has also invested the leaders of the AKP, held responsible for pro-Syrian policies, and could have contributed to reducing the consensus toward the ruling party. This is especially true in Istanbul, the Turkish municipality where the highest number of temporary protection permits for Syrians, and where there have also been clashes between the local population and refugees. In response, there has been a tightening of the management of policies toward Syrian refugees in the country: in July 2019 the authorities in Istanbul declared that by October 30<sup>th</sup>, 6 Syrians whose temporary protection permits had been issued in a province other than Istanbul must leave the city and return to their province of issue. Controls have multiplied, and Syrians not registered or not in

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<sup>71</sup> Al Jazeera (2020b) *Turkey's Erdogan replaces central bank governor as lira plummets* [Online] 7 Nov

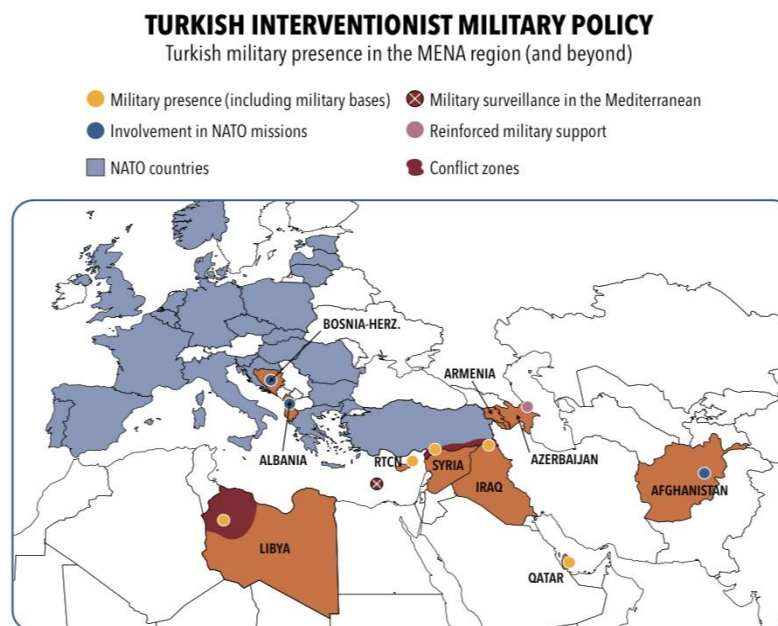
<sup>72</sup> Pitel, L. (2020b) Turkey's new central bank chief overhauls lira policy. *The Financial Times* [Online] December 16

<sup>73</sup> European Commission (2015a) *Turkey: Extension of EU humanitarian programmes supporting 1.7 million refugees receives green light* [Online]

possession of their documents are thus transferred to places indicated by the Ministry of the Interior. Numerous humanitarian organizations and newspapers have denounced the deportation of some Syrians to their country of origin, following the signature of a voluntary return document that would exonerate the Turkish authorities for non-compliance with the Geneva Convention – and in particular the principle of non-refoulement (art. 33) – of which Ankara is a signatory. However, these allegations were strongly denied by the Turkish authorities. Furthermore, the possibility for Syrians duly registered in Turkey to enjoy free health care, one of the most unpopular measures according to Turkish citizens, was recently canceled (ISPI, 2019).

### **1.4 Turkey’s hedging strategy**

From the Middle East to North Africa through the Eastern Mediterranean, the north star of Erdoğan’s model manifests in asserting Turkey’s influence in a highly unstable region undergoing a profound reorganization. As a matter of fact, its active agency is entrenched in the emerging power *vacuum* following the U.S. withdrawal, Washington’s decision to arm the YPG/PKK, Turkey’s Western allies abandoning Ankara and forcing it to work with Russia in the Syrian theater, and the EU surrendering to Greece and France’s maximalist objectives.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, it fits into the wider competition for influence in the MENA region that in recent years has seen Saudi Arabia and Iran at the forefront with their respective allies, and has prompted Ankara to intervene to contrast the hegemonic aspirations of others and at the same time preserve its interests in those theatres of crisis where these they are most at risk.



Source: Le Monde

<sup>74</sup> Duran, B. (2020a) Emerging power vacuums and Turkey’s new activism. *Daily Sabah* [Online] Jul, 18

### Fig.1: Turkish interventionist military policy

Source: Talbot, V. (2020a) Turkey's Assertiveness on the Regional Stage. In: ISPI, *Navigating the pandemic. The challenge of stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean* [Online] 6th edition, Rome, Mediterranean Dialogues, p. 32

Retrieved from: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/navigating-pandemic-challenge-stability-and-prosperity-mediterranean-28422> [06/01/2021]

At a macroscopic level, a partial U.S. retrenchment beginning with the Obama administration crafted an unpredictable, post-hegemonic international architecture that is prone to competition for emerging actors, especially in regions characterized by fragile state apparatus (the Middle East, Eastern Europe, South East Asia). Turkey aspires to minimize the risks connected with the current uncertainty and turbulence of the international system, coupled with regional instability in its neighborhood, by engaging in compartmentalized, multi-vectorial policy. This path complements with hedging, a long-term approach that can be understood as retaining more than one strategic option against possible security threats in a complex security environment.<sup>75</sup> It involves military strengthening (defense spending and quality improvement) without a declared adversary, the lack of firm balancing<sup>76</sup> or bandwagoning<sup>77</sup> requiring predictability in the world order, growing participation in voluntary bilateral and multilateral cooperation – in contrast with rules-based cooperation – and the concurrent/equidistant improvement in relations with the two greatest regional powers. In fact, Erdoğan has advanced a restructuring of the military to improve foreign operational capabilities. Indeed, in April and September 2016, Turkey built new military bases in Qatar and Somalia, respectively. These add up to the contentious Bashiqa base in northern Iraq, installed in late 2015, and the Cyprus Turkish Peace Force Command, present in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus since 1974. Furthermore, as part of the increasing global projection of its military might, Turkey promoted its high-altitude, long-endurance Bayraktar Akıncı armed drone – a type of unmanned craft formerly made only by the United States and China – as a prominent example

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<sup>75</sup> Jackson, V. (2014) Power, Trust, and network complexity: three logics of hedging in Asian security. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* [Online] Volume 14, Issue 3, September, p.333

<sup>76</sup> The concept of balancing derives from the balance of power theory, the most influential theory from the realist scholarship. By balancing, a great power tries to prevent an attacker from altering the existing balance of power. This strategy can be of two types: external balancing (creating, for example, a defensive alliance that aims to contain the attacking power); internal balancing (for example, by mobilizing additional resources internally). Mazzei, F., Marchetti, R., Petito, F. (2010) *Manuale di politica internazionale*. EGEA

<sup>77</sup> Bandwagoning in IR occurs when a state aligns with a stronger, adversarial power and concedes that the stronger adversary-turned-partner disproportionately gains in the spoils they obtain together (Mearsheimer, J.J., 2001, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Norton)

since it is expected to become a critical asset in the Turkish Air Force.<sup>78</sup> With respect to fostering bilateral and multilateral relations, Turkey was accepted as a dialogue partner of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) in 2012 – an unusual role for a NATO Member State – and has expressed interest in receiving observer status or joining the organization as a full member since 2013.<sup>79</sup> Finally, Ankara’s novel balanced diplomacy does not imply a complete reorientation of its foreign policy but rather an attempt to expand its strategic choices. Opposed to the setbacks experienced following Davutoğlu’s soft power leaning approach, the new multidimensional agenda seeks to reverse the damages that occurred due to Turkey’s miscalculations concerning the international system and regional order, which occurred precisely due to the overstatement of its soft power and reliance on the stability of the system.

Nevertheless, hedging is viable as long as the unpredictability remains in the international and regional structure. If a hegemon rises, and or a bipolar structure materializes in the international system, there will not be any room to conduct flexible foreign policy.

## **Conclusions**

The Turkish quest for autonomy does not constitute a novel phenomenon. As mentioned above, there has been a robust element of self-realization in the foreign policy vision of Turkey since the end of the Cold War. The latter altered Turkey’s geopolitical situation consistently: the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact transformed Turkey’s strategic position from a flank country in NATO to a crossroads between several regions and a plurality of newly independent states. Thus, the country diversified its relations and expanded its influence toward the post-Soviet Turkic countries in Central Asia. These upheavals accompanied the transition from a state-directed to a market economy in Turkey, which in time engendered a new class of business entrepreneurs in search of export opportunities. However, Turkey’s lack of material capabilities (mainly economic), and most importantly, the rigidity of the post-Cold War unipolar structure prevented the country from attaining its foreign policy goals. Thus, it continued to bandwagon with the US and NATO.

Within the span of a few decades, Turkey grew into a trading state with one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and this advancement significantly shaped the basis of Turkish foreign policy thinking from security to the economy. Rather than a threat to national security, Turkey’s geostrategic position was now regarded as beneficial for the country in terms

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<sup>78</sup> Pierini, M. (2020a) Emerging From the Pandemic, Turkey Rolls Out a More Assertive Foreign Policy. *Carnegie Europe* [Online] June 03

<sup>79</sup> Gaspers, J. (2017) Turkey’s SCO Ambitions Challenge EU and United States. *The German Marshall Fund of the United States* [Online] July 14

of trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. Thus, in the 2000s, Ankara retained its ambition of magnified leverage wedded to a realist-based foreign policy, sustained by the current Turkish elite belief that Turkey is a prospective central power and possesses the economic means to sustain its objectives. The Turkish leadership's critical decisions reflect, according to Ömer Taşpınar (2011, 4), increasing Turkish self-confidence, nationalism, and independence vis-à-vis the West. Notably, developments under Erdoğan – from new bridges, hospitals, tunnels, and airports to foreign troop deployments, a light aircraft carrier, new submarines, Turkish-manufactured armed drones – are functional to a single thread, that of a 2023 strategy. In fact, what may sound irreconcilable to Western observers reveals a more compelling rationale in the Turkish context, shaped primarily by the next presidential election scheduled in principle for June 2023, ahead of the Republic of Turkey's centennial in October (Pierini, 2020a). It is thus evident that President Erdoğan intends to surpass – and in some ways reverse – Atatürk's legacy. Similarly, the centennial must affirm Turkish power and modernity and revitalize its influence in the former Ottoman arena.

In conclusion, Ankara is progressively acting on its own to secure what it perceives as core national interests—even if it means confronting Western allies. Overall, this does not by itself herald a fundamental shift in Turkey's international orientation, but undoubtedly makes Turkey a more challenging partner for the United States and Europe.

## 2. Turkey between (and beyond) NATO and Russia. The Syrian chessboard

*“Kotu komsu insani kap  
kacak sahibi yapar”*.<sup>80</sup>

(A bad neighbor forces one  
to have his own pots and  
pans).

Turkish proverb.

### **Introduction**

This chapter intends to identify the rationale underlying the international relations of Erdoğan’s Turkey, with particular emphasis on its fluctuating involvement in the Syrian civil war. The first paragraph inquires about the country’s long-standing commitment to NATO, accentuating the centrifugal forces that have recently undermined political harmony. In the second paragraph, the author dwells on the Turkish–Russian rapprochement for the sake of studying whether this amounts to a strategic re-orientation or a tactic entente. The military campaigns conducted in northern Syria since 2016 epitomize a valid case study for a thorough analysis of Turkey’s international posture. Lastly, the author contends that Turkey is committed to its diplomatic and security priorities only.

### **2.1 Turkey–NATO relations**

Due to her geography at the nexus of the Levant, the wider Middle East and the Persian Gulf, and the Caucasus and Central Asia – in which NATO is engaged in comprehensive partnership mechanisms, constructive dialogues, in addition to several other operations – as well as entrenched cultural and historical ties, Turkey plays a central role in the Alliance’s outreach to its partners in these areas. Turkey’s proximity to diverse global hotspots makes the continuing availability of its territory for the transport and stationing of arms, cargo, and personnel profitable for NATO. Turkey hosts forces from other NATO countries at its İncirlik<sup>81</sup> and Konya air bases, forces from the NATO Allied Land Command in Izmir, the Center of Excellence on Defence Against Terrorism in Ankara, and the U.S. early-warning radar in Kürecik that is part of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) to missile defense

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<sup>80</sup> Turkish Cultural Foundation, *Turkish proverbs* [Online]

<sup>81</sup> The Incirlik Airbase is not a NATO facility but has been made available for NATO/US use has been vital for air forces in the fight against ISIS. Griffiths, A. (2016) The Trouble(s) with Turkey: Turkey and NATO. *Canadian Global Affairs Institute* [Online] November, p. 2



(Flanagan, Larrabee, et al., 2020: xix). Moreover, Ankara remains actively committed to other Alliance political institutions, the integrated military structure, and exercise programs, and substantially contributes to current operations, standing forces, and the NATO Response Force. Its input into the NATO Force Structure can be appreciated in the establishment of a High Readiness Force Headquarter (NRDC-T) in Istanbul, among the six Graduated Readiness Force (GRF) Headquarters within NATO. After preparations, as a result of the revision of the NATO Command Structure, Turkey is forecast to maintain hosting one of the Headquarters of the Alliance.<sup>82</sup> In addition, Ankara controls access to and from the Black Sea through its straits consistent with the 1936 Montreux Convention. Given its distinctive disposition as far as the sensitivities of Islamic societies and Western military intervention are concerned, Turkey's contribution as a Muslim state to NATO's military operations in Muslim countries has effectively built NATO's credible identity as a leading collective security actor. It, in turn, allowed the Organization to keep its prominence in the post-Cold War years. The second-largest military force in NATO<sup>83</sup>, Turkey has proven to be a staunch member, upholding the Alliance's endeavors to project security in the Euro-Atlantic region and beyond. Borrowing words from Davutoğlu, "*Turkey is not a security consumer, but a security promoter.*"<sup>84</sup>

Conversely, NATO membership is still paramount to Turkish national security strategy against high-intensity threats. It confers on Turkey a seat at the North Atlantic Council, where crucial policy decisions on Euro-Atlantic security are formulated. The Alliance is the only relevant international organization that accords Turkey a voice and veto rights on par with the United States and Europe. NATO's traditional value has been to alleviate Turkey's concerns about encroachment by neighbors: thus, at the rising of regional tensions, Turkey has swiftly turned to the United States and other NATO Allies for military support. For instance, NATO is the guardian of inter-alliance peace between Turkey and Greece, thereby sustaining a delicate balance to avert a military confrontation in the Aegean Sea. Ankara has devised a long-term policy of participating in the international organizations that Athens joins to be on a par with it. Leaving the most crucial one would put Turkey in the problematic position of challenging the alliance alone. Last but not least, the nuclear umbrella factors into the weight that Turkey enjoys when approaching its competitive adversary and historic nemesis in foreign policy, Iran

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<sup>82</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d.-b), *II. Turkey's and NATO's views on current issues of the Alliance* [Online]

<sup>83</sup> Turkey is one of the few NATO states that manage to meet the desired 2% of GDP expenditure on the military. (See Griffiths, 2016, p. 2)

<sup>84</sup> Davutoğlu, A. (2012) Transformation of NATO and Turkey's Position. *PERCEPTIONS* [Online] Spring, Volume XVII, Number 1, p. 16

and Russia respectively – even as its relations with both have warmed afresh – and Article 4 (consultations amongst member states) and Article 5 (collective defense) of the North Atlantic Treaty serve as effective insurance guarantees in this regard.<sup>85</sup>



**Fig.2: Map of US and NATO military presence in Turkey**

Source: Zanotti, J., Thomas, C. (2020) Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief. *Congressional Research Service* [Online] July 9, Retrieved from: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44000.pdf> [22/11/2020]

Given that Turkey’s relationship with NATO has endured for over sixty years, we can argue that Turkish membership to NATO was not merely a necessity of the moment. Although Ankara does not minimize NATO’s vitality in the materialization of its security interests, Turkey’s role within the Alliance, and how it assesses the benefits of being a member of NATO have changed. On the one hand, Turkish statements and actions on many foreign policy issues have led to problems with the United States and its other NATO allies, fueling concern about Turkey’s alliance dependence and Western orientation.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, the Turkish public

<sup>85</sup> Yegin, M. (2019) Turkey between NATO and Russia: The Failed Balance. *SWP* [Online] No. 30, June, p. 2

<sup>86</sup> See Zanotti, Thomas, 2020

and political elite have recently cast doubts about the reliability of NATO's collective security commitment<sup>87</sup> and its relevance in tackling the country's most immediate security threats—countering terrorism and separatism at home and in Turkey's neighborhood. In particular, they see the policies that the United States and other allies have implemented in Syria as inimical to Turkish security. Sensing that other NATO members treated it as a junior partner, Turkey has arguably pursued greater foreign policy diversification through intensified relationships with a number of countries.

### 2.1.1 From collective defense to collective security

Turkey built closer ties with the West, especially with the USA after positively responding to the Security Council's (UNSC) call for support to South Korea in 1950. Therefore, Ankara's decision to join the war is commonly seen as the decisive moment for its entry into the Alliance. The rational calculation grounded on security concerns, namely prospective military and economic benefits, does not amount to the single driving factor behind Turkey's pursuit of NATO's membership.<sup>88</sup> NATO was instrumental for Ankara not only in terms of protection from new security threats of the evolving conjuncture but also for the institutionalization of the claimed "Western" vocation and the realization of Atatürk's objective of Westernization. From NATO's standpoint, bringing Turkey into the fold of a newly developing transatlantic security community was not merely the consequence of a shared perception of a common momentary threat but also a broader acquiescence to a liberal international order.<sup>89</sup> Turkey's critical location on Europe's southeastern flank and as part of the "Northern Tier" (alongside Greece, Iran, and Pakistan) supplemented America's policy of containment throughout the Cold War, whereas Turkey's inclusion in the "West" was viewed as a security guarantee against Soviet aggression. During the bipolar era, Turkey devoted a substantial amount of financial and human resources to NATO's security umbrella, together with the provision of military bases and facilities. Its active role in NATO's military operations also helped solidify Turkey's "Western" credentials as well as reinforce its self-perception as being part of the West ideologically. By deterring and containing the Soviet threat, NATO successfully served the

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<sup>87</sup> Turks who question the firmness of NATO's commitment allude to various lessons over the past three decades. First, on the eve of the Gulf War in 1991, many NATO members initially resisted but eventually approved the deployment of NATO air and air defense capabilities to obstruct Iraqi attacks against Turkey. In 2003, several allies declined a U.S. request to launch contingency planning to deter or defend against a possible Iraqi threat to Ankara. Finally, the lack of a coherent NATO response to the Georgia crisis in August 2008 was discouraging to many Turks who speculated how the Alliance might respond in the face of analogous aggression against a member state. See Flanagan, Larrabee et al., 2020: 169.

<sup>88</sup> Kınacıoğlu, M. (2017) NATO–Turkey Relations: From Collective Defence to Collective Security. In: Ercan, P.G., *Turkish Foreign Policy. International Relations, Legality and Global Reach*. Palgrave Macmillan

<sup>89</sup> Aybet, G. (2012) Turkey's Security Challenges and NATO. *Carnegie Europe* [Online]

objective of preventing an actual war and producing an unprecedented peacetime political cooperation among its members, with Turkey finding its rightful place within the Euro-Atlantic scheme. Despite the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the Johnson Letter crisis in 1964, the arms embargo crisis in 1975, and the anti-American sentiments running high in Turkey from time to time, NATO maintained its primary position in the country's security thinking. The most distinctive feature of the Turkish approach toward the Alliance throughout much of the Cold War period resides in the fact that the Turkish leadership interpreted the risks of being abandoned by NATO as more alarming than the risks of being entrapped by some alliance policies.<sup>90</sup>

As the perceived immediate threat ceased to exist with the demise of the Soviet Union, NATO's rationale defined in terms of mutual defense against an external enemy needed revisiting. The Allies elaborated a new purpose by emphasizing the political component of the Alliance as laid out by Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty, signaled as early as 1990 in the London Declaration, whereby the Allies reaffirmed, "*security and stability do not lie solely in the military dimension*" (Kınacıoğlu, 2017: 89). Consequently, despite being an alliance "*which endured the Cold War military challenge without firing a shot*" (Kınacıoğlu, 2013, 589) since the 1990s the Alliance has come to encompass broader political aims and new security priorities, including crisis management and collective security operations in the face of emerging asymmetric threats beyond its borders. In other words, in the post-Cold War era, NATO's transformation entailed a shift from collective defense toward collective security, also in terms of safeguarding human rights and advancing democratic structures.

Having defined for several years its foreign, defense, and security policies based on Alliance membership, Ankara started to embrace a more critical and questioning perspective toward NATO. Since the latter was considered a collective defense organization in the context of

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<sup>90</sup> "Fear of abandonment" and "fear of entrapment" refer to two concepts stemming from the security dilemma that is peculiar to alliance politics. They were brought to use to illustrate the behavior of the allies during the nuclear arms reduction talks between the USA and USSR. Reliance on the U.S. nuclear umbrella triggered two types of fears among other NATO members, that is, the fear of being abandoned by the USA who might be tempted to bargain with the Soviet Union on nuclear weapons, and that of being entrapped in a nuclear confrontation beyond (even against) their will. As a matter of fact, when the United States and the Soviet Union cut a deal to dismantle a whole category of nuclear weapons (the Intermediate Nuclear Forces, INF), other NATO members had to confront the fear of abandonment. Almost at the same time, the US' shift of its strategic focus to the Middle East engendered yet another debate on the "out of area" orientation for NATO which in turn originated a new risk of entrapment for the allies. To address both aspects of the alliance security dilemma, the European members of NATO resuscitated the Western European Union. Unlike other NATO members, the two decades that followed the end of the Cold War witnessed a natural strategic response to both fears by Turkey in the form of a quest for autonomy. Under the AKP, this gradually grew into the privileged strategic choice Güvenç, S., Özel, S. (2012) *NATO and Turkey in the post-Cold War world: between abandonment and entrapment*. [Online] Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Volume 12, Issue 4: Greece and Turkey in NATO

European security, it might be argued that the shared feeling of progressive improvement in European security helped dilute NATO's pre-eminence in the eyes of Turkish decision-makers. Another factor that has proved key in framing Turkey's attitude with respect to NATO in the post-Cold War era is that its relations with European allies have become more and more linked to the country's slow-going accession process to the European Union.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, Ankara simultaneously sought opportunities for regional integration and cooperation, as Turkish foreign policymakers perceived the country's location to be "*in the virtual epicenter of a "Bermuda Triangle" of post-Cold War volatility and uncertainty*" (Turk, 1999). In this phase, its new stance toward the Alliance appears to have been informed more by the risks of being entrapped by NATO's policies than of being abandoned. Nevertheless, Turkey backed NATO's internal reform, adapting its role to the new dynamics and consequently turning into a keen participant of out-of-area operations, in particular ending the inter-ethnic and inter-communal conflicts in the former Yugoslavia (Davutoğlu, 2012: 15). It also favored the expansion of the Alliance through the inclusion of new members to enlarge the zone of peace and security. Hence, since the 1990s Turkey has progressively taken on a pro-active cooperative approach to the management of security risks, whose most noticeable manifestation lies in the country's growing involvement in the multilateral peace operations with a range of missions. Being the only Muslim ally with extensive cultural and historical ties with all target states, Turkey has considerably contributed to fostering the success and legitimacy of these operations. The intervention in Bosnia represents the first example of the actual use of force by NATO in the 1990s, which Ankara joined with 18 F-16 fighter jets (Kınacıoğlu, 2017: 93). Moreover, Turkey vigorously assumed the leadership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to raise concern for the Bosnian cause. Its assertive policy can partly be attributed to the goal of reminding the West of Turkey's strategic value, as well as to further its national interests. While this crisis put to test Turkish input into Western security and values, the Bosnian leadership welcomed the active involvement of a Muslim country.

The September 11 attacks were perceived as a watershed for NATO. Since then, the Alliance has been in a state of ceaseless flux, oscillating between trying to find a new grand strategy and struggling with the inadequacy of its capabilities to face new security challenges (Aybet, 2012). On September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, invoking the "defense guarantee" for the first time in NATO's history implied an extended understanding of Article 5 to encompass whichever situation could threaten alliance security. Thus, unlike its humanitarian military interventions in the 1990s, NATO's operation in Afghanistan in the post-9/11 environment was driven by

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<sup>91</sup> Oğuzlu, T. (2013) *Turkey and NATO*. Adam Akademi [Online] Vol.3, Issue 1, June

collective defense. Moreover, it became a test case for the transformation of NATO because it was the first mission of the Alliance outside Europe – hence enlarging the narrowly defined Euro-Atlantic focus – and involved the largest operational deployment so far. This new collective, borderless defense was to set the stage for NATO’s new dilemma: executing “benign” interventions to rectify “bad” governance conducive to regional instability and human rights abuses, parallel to the obligation to protect Alliance members under Article 5. Washington’s “Global War on Terror” (GWOT) appealed to a Turkish audience all too familiar with terrorist activities perpetrated by Kurds in the 1990s. From the beginning, Turkey not only made available a significant number of troops contributing actively to the UN-authorized International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), but also assumed the command from June 2002 to February 2003, and from February to August 2005 (Kınacıoğlu, 2017: 96). Further, the country led the Kabul Regional Command (RCC), one of the six regional commands of the ISAF operation, from April to December 2007, and from November 2009 to November 2010. Turkey represents the only NATO Ally that did not cut the number of troops in Afghanistan after the end of NATO’s combat mission in 2014. By contrast, it enlarged its military presence and took on a substantial role in NATO’s ongoing Resolute Support mission to offer training, assistance, and advice to the Afghan security forces (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al., 2020: 171). The importance of Turkey in the U.S-led GWOT went beyond its geostrategic position to the symbolism of the engagement of a Muslim-majority state. In fact, Turkish participation in the GWOT was conducive for defusing charges of a “crusade” against Islam and stressing that this was a war against “Islamofascism” (Öktem, K., Kadioğlu, A, Karlı, M., 2012). Meanwhile, Turkey continued to contribute to the ongoing missions, namely the Kosovo Force (KFOR), the Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR), and its follow-on mission under the European Union, EUFOR Althea.

Importantly, Turkey’s position in the 2003 transatlantic crisis in Iraq affected two pivotal developments: first, the Turkish parliament’s refusal to allow U.S. troops to cross into northern Iraq over Turkish territory, hence precluding the opening of a second front in the war; and second, the internal crisis in the Alliance due to the initial refusal of three European allies to support the deployment of the Allied Mobile Force as a preventative measure in Turkey ahead of the war. Despite its rather active role on the operational side of NATO, Turkey was still overlooked in wider strategic thinking.

The 2007 crisis between Turkey and its allies, when the U.S. postponement of Ankara’s request for support in dealing with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) threat in northern Iraq reached a climax, marks a turning point (Aybet, 2012). Following the escalation of attacks by

the PKK against Turkish armed forces, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey passed a resolution authorizing a major military incursion into northern Iraq to extirpate the PKK problem at its roots. This particular crisis entailed reevaluating Turkey's strategic partnership with its Western allies, altering the U.S. position – maintained since 2003 – of “damage limitation” in its relations with Turkey to a more ardent concern<sup>[1]</sup> for Turkish security interests in the region. Further, it signaled that Ankara's hard power still influenced shifting Western perceptions of Turkey. From 2009 onwards, a new phase of Turkey's transatlantic relationship began to take shape. Ankara left behind its functional-ally status reliant on hard power typical of much of the Cold War and early post-Cold War and emerged as a much more regionally assertive soft power. In contrast to its practices in the former military NATO operations, Turkey was initially reluctant to support the aerial campaign in Libya using NATO assets launched by France and the United Kingdom, with U.S. support (Kınacıoğlu, 2017: 97). It was highly sensitive to the possibility of this NATO operation resulting in severe human casualties and negatively conditioning the Turkish image across the Islamic world. It was only after political control of the operation came under the North Atlantic Council that Ankara readjusted its stance by agreeing to the transfer of military operations to NATO command and took part in non-combat military missions, ultimately stepping into a prominent role in forging the changing transatlantic grand strategy in the region. So, it fixed the limits and operational mandate of the operation to be carried out in Libya, assuring that the primary mission to be overseeing the embargo imposed on Muammar Qaddafi forces from the sea and air (Oğuzlu, 2013: 9). Ankara contributed to Operation Unified Protector by delivering four frigates, a submarine, four F-16s fighters, and two tanker aircraft in non-combat roles.<sup>92</sup> Lastly, the NATO airbase in Izmir also served as one of the operational centers for the NATO mission. Turkey has found NATO to be a useful diplomatic tool for regional military engagement, as testified by its interest in the EPAA announced by the Obama administration. Ankara first opposed hosting the radar component of the NATO missile defense system. Nevertheless, it had a long-term strategic interest in being involved in the EPAA partly for realizing its missile defense system in the future. For Turkey, integrating the U.S. plan for a global missile defense system with ongoing transatlantic missile defense plans is suggestive of a more acceptable choice, especially in terms of presenting the plan to Russia, a key energy partner for Turkey. As Taşpınar (2011) commented, “*That decision, in my opinion, was almost a make-or-break move for the Obama administration in terms of testing Turkey's commitment to NATO, testing*

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<sup>92</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d.-c), *IV Turkey's International Security Initiatives and Contributions to NATO and EU Operations. Libya Operation* [Online]

*Turkey's commitment to the trans-Atlantic partnership.*<sup>93</sup>

Turkey rediscovered the usefulness of the Alliance at the time that the developments associated with the Arab uprisings began to affect its security realm and caused further chaos and instability in the Middle East. Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, the expansion of its influence in Iraq, the sectarian policies adopted by Maliki in Iraq, the growing possibility that Israel might strike at Iran's nuclear facilities added up to Turkey's insecurity feelings within a framework of regional polarization after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq. Notably, the ongoing civil war in Syria and the new dynamics of the Kurdish movement across the region carry the risk of putting Tu territorial integrity into jeopardy.

In a pragmatic turn, since 2017, Erdoğan has tried to cut a deal with President Trump regarding the many issues that divide Ankara and Washington. He will then continue to treat the transatlantic Alliance as a security outlet in which he buys into some NATO programs and initiatives but not all of them while making sure that the policies to be pursued by NATO allies do not obstacle its multi-lateral national identity and multi-axial diplomacy. Poignantly, the Turkish president does not want Turkey's NATO membership to end. Brokering ad hoc Syria deals and pipeline bargains with Putin, he knows that he would fall under Russian influence without NATO's ironclad guarantees. Withdrawing from the Alliance or assuming an obstructionist attitude would also raise suspicions on Ankara's foreign policy intentions and interests, both prejudicing Turkey's relations with Western actors and decreasing its soft power across the world.

In conclusion, under the more possessive and shaping role it took on in the transformation process of NATO, Turkey strives to be, quoting Davutoğlu, "*the subject and owner*" of the Alliance, instead of embodying a mere "*object*" of NATO's policies (Oğuzlu, 2013: 7).

### 2.1.2 Factors of divergence

Turkey and NATO are caught up in a structural, symbiotic "alliance dependency".<sup>94</sup> On the one hand, each party supplies the other with indispensable security benefits that run deep and act as key centripetal forces against provisional centrifugal forces. On the other, each party is confident that they are too relevant for the other to seriously contemplate a break. According to this view, both parties identify more benefits than costs in the alliance, which will help contain

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<sup>93</sup> Kucera, J. (2012) Turkey's NATO Radar, Strategic Westernness and Political Westernness. *Eurasianet* [Online] Dec, 8

<sup>94</sup> Lindgaard, J., Pieper, M. (2020) *Turkey's NATO Future. Between alliance dependency, Russia, and strategic autonomy* [Online] DIIS, p. 6



and channel recent areas of disagreement.

Turkey's indispensable role in the Middle East – not just for NATO but also for the EU – may lead to a more constructive and sustained partnership in shaping the future of the region or crack open fault lines of disagreement. One must also consider that differences between Turkey and NATO are not recent, and that mechanisms have been established over time to address them. Echoing an old adage referring to the Ottoman Empire, Galip Dalay (2019) called Turkey “*The Sick Man of NATO*” in view of its unique history, geostrategic position, and domestic politics, a constant source of friction within NATO.

Among the current factors of divergence is anti-Americanism escalating after the Gülen affair; the Kurdish question and the US–YPG partnership against ISIS; the S-400 case; tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean (that the author will recount in Chapter 3).

#### *Anti-Americanism and the Gülen affair*

Turkey has been one of the United States' most loyal and solid allies for more than seven decades. Until only a few years ago, it was praised as a model for the Muslim world and the Middle East in light of its growing economic and political clout, to the point that in 2012 Obama went as far as naming Erdoğan among the top five world leaders he trusted.<sup>95</sup>

Lately, however, a noticeable deterioration – an undeclared crisis – has been observed in the relations between Washington and Ankara. Erdoğan's increasing authoritarianism, the halt of Turkish domestic reform agenda since the Gezi Park protests in 2013, the severe crackdown on Kurdish demonstrators in south-east Turkey in the autumn of 2015, coupled with opposing priorities in the Syrian war, had already soured the mood. Yet, it is in the aftermath of the failed 2016 putsch that long-standing anti-Americanism<sup>96</sup> in Turkey has reached a particularly high crescendo.

On the night of the major assault on a European democracy in decades, the Turkish government tried, through the embassy channels, to elicit a resolute statement from Washington in condemnation of the coup attempt. However, wavering from the terrorist attack in Nice, France, and unable to evaluate how the power struggle would play out, both the European Union and the United States decided to sit on the fence. The EU's foreign policy chief Federica

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<sup>95</sup> Aydıntaşbaş, A., Kirişci, K. (2017) *The United States and Turkey: Friends, enemies, or only interests?* [Online] Brookings, Turkey Project Policy Paper, Number 12, April, p. 2

<sup>96</sup> Anti-Americanism has surfaced in Turkey since at least the late 1960s and 1970s, when several leftists opposed the country's support for the United States in the Cold War period. However, after the Iraq War, the AKP government brought anti-Americanism to the fore. See Cagaptay, 2020: 92.

Mogherini called Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu as the coup was unfolding to inquire about the situation, but also urged restraint in handling the coup plotters (Aydıntaşbaş, Kirişci, 2017: 4). Meanwhile, at a press conference in Moscow, the then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry declared he wished for “*stability and peace*” concerning the situation in Turkey and did not comment further. The Turkish leadership was scandalized that the West did not stand with the democratically elected party in its hour of need. Rather, high-ranking members of the AKP government, including Erdoğan, interpreted the tepid European and American responses as a hidden hope, if not unequivocal support, for a successful coup. Citing Erdoğan’s statement on the third anniversary of the failed putsch, “*Despite our political and military pacts with the Western alliance, the fact is that once again the biggest threats we face are from them*” (Lindgaard, Pieper, 2020: 18). Accordingly, the events of July 15 tragically altered Turkey’s perceptions of its key ally. The presence of planes refueling at the İncirlik Air Base, and the fact that some of the putschists came from the ranks of NATO officers, some also residing abroad, underpinned Turkey’s belief that the United States had prior knowledge of the coup attempt. When questioned about Gülen’s involvement in the plot, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said, “*we haven’t seen it yet. We certainly haven’t seen it in intel*” — contravening Turkey’s official narrative (Aydıntaşbaş, Kirişci, 2017: 4). Later he also added, “*many of our interlocutors have been purged or arrested. ... there’s no question this is going to set back and make more difficult cooperation with the Turks,*” (Aydıntaşbaş, Kirişci, 2017: 5)—further enhancing Ankara’s assumption that the US was backing the coup. In fact, looking at Turkey from the USA and Europe, the fallout of the coup attempt epitomized a swift worsening of Turkey’s democratic credentials, painting the general picture of a country that no longer shares the basic values at the bedrock of the Alliance.

In the subsequent days and weeks, pro-government Turkish outlets like *Yeni Şafak*, *Sabah*, *Star*, *Takvim*, and *ensonhaber.com* openly began associating the Gülen movement with the US or the CIA. Furthermore, an op-ed that was published a week following the coup attempt by the former vice-chairman of the CIA’s National Intelligence Council, Graham Fuller, cast doubt upon the possibility that US-based cleric Gülen masterminded the putsch. It then took numerous phone calls and visits for the Obama administration to persuade their Turkish interlocutors – with mixed results – that the US was not behind the violent attempt to overthrow the Turkish government. Following visits to Ankara by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford and the then-Vice President Joe Biden in August 2016 were directed at repairing strained ties and discouraging the Turks from pointing the anger at the U.S. Both men visited the Turkish parliament, bombed on the night of July 15 by the coup plotters, hoping to

visually convey that the US did not uphold any attempts to overthrow Turkey's elected government. On the topic of extraditing Gülen, Biden reiterated that the US had "*no interest whatsoever in protecting anyone who has done harm to an ally*" and privately advised Turkish officials on the need to meet the standard legal requirements for their extradition demands. From the American perspective, the evidence Turkey presented to the U.S. Department of Justice was voluminous but defective, relying excessively on testimonies from individuals under custody at the time and failing to provide the smoking gun tying Gülen to the coup attempt in a manner that would stand up in a court of law. Therefore, frustration has surfaced in Turkey over Washington's alleged insistence on sheltering a man Ankara designated as a terrorist. Likewise, there is frustration in the United States over the absence of any direct evidence so far submitted linking Gülen to the events of July 15. As summarized by a senior U.S. official, "*the difference is, Washington sees this largely as a legal matter and Turks see it as a political issue*" (Aydıntaşbaş, Kirişci, 2017: 6).

Having unsuccessfully urged both President Obama and Trump to bypass the U.S. judicial process and hasten Gülen's extradition, Erdoğan embarked on a series of extrajudicial actions of his own against supposed Gülen sympathizers, availing himself of his state-of-emergency powers. Consequently, the Turkish government circle set out to seek and arrest more alleged coup plotters and Gülen supporters, among which U.S. and Western European citizens<sup>97</sup>, feeding the perception in Washington that Ankara was engaging in "hostage diplomacy", that is, exploiting detentions to extract favorable terms from Washington on issues where the USA and Turkey diverged.

The legal impediments around Gülen's extradition and the dense presence of Gülen supporters in the US have since then preponderated over both sides' calculus. Doubts about the prospective form of their partnership ran so deep that both Turkey and the United States tested its limits by investing in ties with other actors to gain diplomatic leverage. If the former pursued a rapprochement with Russia, the latter engaged the Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS, with U.S. Vice-President Mike Pence and his Turkish counterpart, Fuat Oktay, blaming each other for risking the alliance by developing an affinity with each other's adversaries

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<sup>97</sup> Turkey jailed a Turkish US consulate employee, Metin Topuz, in Istanbul in October 2017 for his alleged affiliation with Gülen. This pushed the United States to retaliate by halting *pro tempore* the issuance of travel visas to Turkish citizens, although the visa issue was later determined through diplomatic channels. Notably, in the wake of the attempted coup, Turkey detained an American pastor, Andrew Brunson, who had resided in Turkey for 23 years, over alleged links to the Gülen's network to instigate Kurdish rebellions in Turkey in a quest to destabilize the country. He was sentenced to time served in October 2018 and released immediately. Beyoghlou, K. (2020) *Turkey and the United States on the brink: implications for NATO and the US-Turkish strategic and military partnership* [Online] Strategic Studies Institute and United States Army War College Press, p.24

(Yegin, 2019: 1).

### *The Kurdish question and the US–YPG partnership against ISIS*

Ever since Obama’s deliberation in 2015 to arm the YPG through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Trump approved upon taking office, Turkish–US relations have been fraught with deep crises.

The Kurdish conflict constitutes one of the most sensitive issues in Turkish politics due to its often violent nature and ranks among the biggest irritants in Turkey–EU relations. The terrorist campaign and government countermeasures over the past three decades have resulted in an estimated 30,000–45,000 fatalities, including 6,000 Turkish military and police forces and many Kurdish civilians. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds have been expelled from their homes and a huge number of Kurdish villages have been eradicated (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al., 2020: 22). It is important to notice that Turkey has treated the Kurdish issue as if it coincided with the PKK insurrection – in fact, many Kurds oppose the PKK and see whoever aids it as an enemy (Cagaptay, 2020: 109) –, and its focus has been to wipe out the PKK’s military wing. Until very recently, the United States has mostly subscribed to this position, but the European states have been more disapproving.



**Fig.3: Kurdistan**

Source: BBC (2019b) *Who are the Kurds?* [Online] 15 October. Retrieved from:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440>

Historically, much of the underlying logic for the Turkish semi-authoritarian political system

was the perceived threat of ethnic separatism—prominently, Kurdish nationalism. Mustafa Kemal erected the new political order and social setting of the Turkish Republic in part on the notion of Turkishness, which did not accommodate other ethnic groups – the fifth columns – in the state carved from what was endured of the Ottoman Empire. Among them, the majority of Kurds withstood efforts at linguistic and cultural assimilation and repression from the outset and staged major uprisings in the 1920s and 1930s that were brutally suppressed.<sup>98</sup> The Turkish state intended to put an end to the Kurdish question, i.e. to the armed or unarmed resistance of Kurds to the Turkish state, by assimilation, repression, and containment. Cooperating with Iran, Iraq and Syria, the Turkish state did whatever it could to ensure that the Kurds of Syria, and Iraq were not accorded any cultural and political rights and did not engage in contact with the Kurds of Turkey.<sup>99</sup> Violence flared again in 1984 when the PKK emerged as a revolutionary organization in quest of Turkish independence and marked a milestone in the evolution of the Kurdish national movement, entering the stage of sustained armed struggle.<sup>100</sup> Under its founder Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK launched a terrorist insurgency, focused on southeastern Turkey and backed from safe havens in Iraq and Syria, to establish a separate, unified Kurdish state. The containment approach worked until the 1990s when the Turkish state was presented with two meaningful developments. First, the Kurds' resistance to the politics of assimilation and repression reached unmanageable proportions. The PKK had *de facto* turned into a massive military organization keeping up a low profile war against the TSK and a political-complex that operated newspapers and TV channels mobilizing thousands of civilians in Turkey and Europe. Moreover, one-third of Kurdish citizens endorsed a pro-Kurdish party in line with the PKK. Second, the protection the US and NATO provided to Kurds in Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War prejudiced seven decades of restraint. Under these new conditions and in contrast to the Turkish army's hostility toward Kurds in Iraq, Özal commenced policies of slim recognition aimed at establishing friendly relations with them and sending his mediators to convince Öcalan to accept a ceasefire. The PKK declared a ceasefire in March 1993 for a month, and, as it was preparing to protract it for another month, Özal passed away on April 17<sup>th</sup>. The Turkish state then returned to a harsh campaign of repression, which only ended in 1999 when Abdullah Öcalan was captured in Kenya – allegedly by a CIA operation – and handed over to Ankara.

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<sup>98</sup> Albright, M., Hadley, J.S., Cook, S.A. (2012) U.S.–Turkey Relations. A New Partnership. *Council on Foreign Relations* [Online] p. 27

<sup>99</sup> Yeğen, M. (2015) The Turkish Peace Process in Turkey: Genesis, Evolution and Prospects. *IAI-Stiftung Mercator* [Online] Working paper 11, May, p. 3

<sup>100</sup> Barkey, H.J., Fuller, G.E. (1998) *Turkey's Kurdish Question* [Online] Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., p. 21

After his capture, Öcalan proposed to help the Turkish government settle the conflict and demanded that PKK militants desist from their armed struggle and withdraw from Turkey. He also committed to using political means to gain cultural rights, constitutional changes, and freedom of expression. The PKK militants followed Öcalan's orders and retired to Iraqi Kurdistan, but the Turkish army did not halt its military operations and killed hundreds of militants during their departure. By the end of the millennium, Turkey appeared to have ceased the Kurds' opposition to the *status quo*.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the PKK exploited the changed situation to renew its campaign in southeastern Turkey from sanctuaries in Iraq's Qandil Mountains. The Turkish military responded forcibly, including after an additional uptick in 2007, with a major ground operation into northern Iraq and air attacks. The PKK subsequently launched its Syrian, Iranian, and Iraqi proxies: the PYD, the PJAK (the "Kurdistan Free Life Party") and PCDK (the "Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party"), respectively. Of these three offshoots, only the Syrian progeny of the PKK truly sprouted. In the second half of that decade, Turkey's security establishment assessed that a purely military solution was impossible. Thus, the National Security Council authorized secret contacts with the PKK in 2007, hastening internationally supported mediation efforts since 2005, the so-called "Oslo talks" (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al., 2020: 23).

The AKP's approach to the Kurdish question was first outlined in the party program in 2001. Examining the Kurdish question under the ambiguous and innovative title of "the Southeast," the program implied that, just like the other former mainstream parties, the AKP would frame the Kurdish question in relation to "terror," "underdevelopment" and "foreign incitement". Nonetheless, it also conceded that economic development alone would not be sufficient to tackle the question, and suggested recognizing the cultural differences of Turkish citizens. Notably, in a landmark move, the AKP pointed to citizenship as the main point of reference for national identity, when all mainstream parties and all three constitutions of the republic had until then defined national identity in terms of Turkishness (Yeğen, 2015: 4). In 2008 and 2009, the AKP began advocating what was called a Kurdish opening consisting of democratic reforms and recognition of the Kurds' cultural and political rights in return for the disarmament of the PKK. However, it proved far smaller than foreseen, as it was purposefully vague and hence easily left to wither and die once opposition consolidated to any fundamental alteration of the status of Turkey's Kurdish citizens. PKK and HDP leaders embraced the process as an opportunity to deepen democracy in Turkey – the PKK committed to several ceasefires and transform from an internationally outlawed terrorist organization to a legitimate political power

– but cast the government’s actions as wavering and inadequate. The reconciliation process faltered amid the June 2011 general elections<sup>101</sup>, after which negotiations collapsed again and violence resurfaced. The Turkish government revived outreach to the Kurds in a further round of talks with the PKK between early 2013 and summer 2015, during which both sides declared that a framework agreement was in reach. While the AKP anticipated a sustained ceasefire to be beneficial in critical elections in 2014 and 2015, especially amid decaying relations with the Gülen movement, the PKK transferred its military focus southwards as the Syrian civil war seemed to grant a historic chance to establish an autonomous Kurdish state in northern Syria. This led to the resurgence of assaults by the PKK and its offshoot group, the TAK (the “Kurdistan Freedom Falcons”) on the Turkish military and security forces. They are deemed responsible for some 450 attacks in Turkey and Western Europe between mid-2015 and late 2016; the cycle of violence produced more than 570 casualties among security forces and civilians and nearly 2,000 injured (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al., 2020: 34). Between 2015 and mid-2017, the International Crisis Group evaluated that the military intensification in southeastern Turkey – reminiscent of operations conducted during the civil war in the 1990s, including curfews and dragnet security operations – had killed three times as many people as the 2011-2012 escalation did (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al., 2020: 34). At the same time, a looser chain of command in the Kurdish insurgency relocated the battle from the countryside and mountains to bigger cities through the PKK’s youth wing, the YGD-H (the “Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement”). Furthermore, Ankara’s hostile policy toward the PYD – the PKK’s Syrian offshoot – and its militias built further discontent among the Kurdish public. This was particularly evident when the conflict between Syrian Kurds and Islamist anti-Asad rebels, many of whom assumed to be sponsored by Turkey and its allies, ascended and peaked with ISIS’s October 2014 siege of the Kurdish border town Kobanî. More than 50 people perished in protests against the government’s aversion to back Kobanî and other areas in

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<sup>101</sup> Despite the shortcomings of the government’s strategy, approximately two-thirds of Kurdish voters in Turkey (making up about 16 percent of the electorate) supported the AKP in national elections in 2002, 2007, and 2011, as well as in the municipal elections in 2004 and 2009. Although this electoral dominance in the Kurdish region had been disputed by the HDP’s success in the June 2015 general elections, the AKP garnered one million Kurdish votes in the November 2015 snap elections through a grand campaign targeting resumed PKK violence in the southeast and mass arrests of HDP officials. According to HDP sources, 8,711 of its members were apprehended and 2,705 arrested between July 2015 and early 2017. In November 2016, the party’s then co-chairs, Figen Yüksekdağ and Selahattin Demirtaş were arrested with 11 other members of Parliament, and they remained in jail as of mid-2019. Although the government did not formally ban the party, the wide-ranging disenfranchisement of the HDP’s leadership and voter base diminished most of its political leverage. Remarkably, the party managed to accomplish 11.7 percent of the vote in the 2018 election, crossing the 10-percent threshold required to be seated in Parliament. This helps the AKP argue with international critics that Kurds are not denied a political voice. Nevertheless, the HDP remains marginalized in a chamber with declined authority, where two-thirds of parliamentary colleagues come from nationalist parties. See Flanagan, Larrabee, 2020: 25.

southeast Turkey where ensuing clashes broke out. The crisis testified not only to Ankara's disregard for Turkish Kurds' concerns regarding their Syrian kin but also to the incessant failure of the AKP to develop an encompassing domestic and regional Kurdish policy. The 2016 coup attempt, which galvanized the conservative-nationalist AKP-MHP coalition, caused a hardening and further militarization of Ankara's Kurdish policy.

The war in Syria has internationalized Turkey's Kurdish problem, connecting the PKK in Turkey and the YPG in Syria. In 2012, just as Erdoğan began allowing foreign fighters to cross into Syria and harbored anti-Asad rebels in Turkish provinces such as Şanlıurfa and Hatay, the Asad regime vacated the country's Kurdish-dominated regions along its border with Turkey, transferring some troops from these territories to areas where its authority was being directly disputed. The YPG, staffed by local Kurds – a majority from Turkey or descendant of emigres in the early twentieth century and therefore holding resentment toward Ankara – was quick to fill the vacuum, emerging as a threat to Ankara. Asad now had a hand equal to that of Erdoğan. The PYD installed three self-declared cantons in these areas, namely Afrin, Kobanî, and Qamishli. Kurdish-majority areas were not contiguous, contained large populations of non-Kurds, and presented their own Kurdish opposition (non-PYD/PKK) elements. The PYD's military wing, the YPG, promptly exterminated such opposition, installing itself as the chief authority in the cantons. Collectively and informally known as 'Rojava', these PYD- and YPG-held areas soon converted into Erdoğan's enemy in Syria—confirming Asad's calculus (Cagaptay, 2020: 122).

In September 2014, ISIS initiated a campaign to seize Kobanî – the pivotal city belonging to the PYD's self-declared Kobanî canton in northern Syria – that became the first battle against ISIS broadcast live to global audiences. A universal appeal to protect the people of Kobanî against the black flags, along with the opportunity for the USA to inflict a crushing defeat on the jihadist group, led to one of the most consequential American decisions in the Syrian civil war. As the Turkish President declined the YPG's request for help, grossly miscalculating his decision, the U.S.-led coalition launched aerial attacks on ISIS near Kobanî and equipped the YPG with airdrops and ammunition. Urgently searching for allies in Syria with which to combat ISIS, but committed to doing so without putting U.S. boots on the ground, President Obama gradually decided to forge a relationship with YPG to defeat ISIS. The Kurd's utilitarian value increased in the President's eyes after taking a cue from the YPG's battlefield successes against ISIS in Iraq in the summer of 2014, in Syria in the fall, and the re-capture of Kobanî in October of the same year. Given that Washington could not afford to risk providing weapons to an offshoot of a terrorist entity, in October 2015 the YPG rebranded itself as part of



the SDF, itself consisting of an alliance of several smaller Syrian factions, such as the SAC (the “Syrian American Council”). When the Turkish President raised his objection, Obama informed him that the United States would proceed, regardless.

Prior to the coup attempt, in May 2016, Erdoğan reluctantly agreed to Obama’s personal demand to consent to American warplanes taking off from İncirlik in support of Syrian Kurds who were gearing up to cross the Euphrates river and take on Manbij, an ISIS stronghold (Aydıntaşbaş, Kirişci, 2017: 6). His green light was conditional on the YPG’s return to the eastern side of Euphrates once the town had been seized. The Euphrates had long been a “red line” for Turkey, and Ankara demanded that the Kurds not move west of the river, worried that they would control Turkey’s entire border region. Following the costly yet fruitful operation, the Kurds did not return behind the imaginary red line on the Euphrates drawn by Turkey, making Ankara even more distrustful of the Obama administration.

Since the PKK and YPG are closely linked and share overlapping command structures, Obama’s policy decision caused the biggest crisis ever witnessed in the U.S.–Turkey relationship—at least this was the perspective from Ankara, which felt Washington was ignoring its essential security concerns. To be fair, the U.S. relationship with the YPG stemmed by default rather than by up-front premeditation in Washington, but the Turkish President failed to appreciate this progression. Worse, Erdoğan may have committed his greatest misstep in foreign policy to date: due to the stalemate in Turkey–U.S. talks to form a Turkey-backed militia to counter ISIS, he skipped an opportunity to deliver a crushing blow to the jihadist group together with the USA, and simultaneously to inhibit further growth of the nascent YPG–U.S. relationship.

#### *The S-400 case*

Another prominent case that has strained relations between Turkey and other NATO members is the bilateral U.S.–Turkish dispute over the Turkish acquisition and taking delivery, in the summer of 2019, of the Russian surface-to-air S-400 missile defense system.

Since the founding of the Alliance, NATO member states have dedicated themselves to achieving Western weapon systems for conventional military operations. Much of NATO’s collective security logic rests upon ease of integration and interoperability between different NATO military personnel and weapon systems. The majority of NATO members that possess Russian military equipment are former Soviet bloc countries that joined NATO after the Cold War, and only three NATO members (Bulgaria, Greece, and Slovakia) have been permitted to buy Russian military missile systems, essentially because they were purchasing older systems

like the S-300.<sup>102</sup> Not one NATO member state has dared to obtain advanced military equipment from a non-Western State, apart from Turkey.

Ever since the Gulf War, Turkey adamantly requested NATO allies to supply adequate air and missile defense capabilities, first owing to the threat of Iraq's Scud missiles, later to the Iranian missile program, and currently considering the threat the Syrian civil war poses to Turkish territory. NATO allies responded by providing and stationing their air and missile defense systems, such as the U.S. Patriot or Italian/French Eurosam SAMP/T, or early warning systems and making assurances.<sup>103</sup> More and more dissatisfied with having to depend on other states for its protection in the aerial domain, Ankara formally initiated the so-called T-LORAMIDS program in 2007. The Chinese offer of HQ-9/FD-2000 won against the U.S., Russian, and Italian/French alternatives, but the deal was revoked in 2015, partly because of the Chinese reluctance to share technology as well as of concerns voiced within NATO. In the meanwhile, the country showed interest in purchasing the Patriot missile system early in the Obama Presidency, investing heavily in the development of the F-35 – indeed as the sole supplier of multiple parts – and having signed up to buying at least 100 aircraft. Following the November 2015 “plane crisis”, in which Turkey downed a Russian jet along the Syrian border, on the claim that it had violated its airspace, Russia deployed S-400 anti-aircraft missiles at the Hmeimim airbase in Syria, imposed trade sanctions, and interrupted Russian package tours to Turkey, harming Turkey's economy. Ankara's request for assistance to defend itself against Moscow's retaliation failed to produce a fervent show of support from its transatlantic allies—at least as the Turkish President saw it (Cagaptay, 2020: xix). Doubts about NATO and U.S. loyalty to Turkey, coupled with the awareness that the normalization process with Russia did not bring about a parallel reconciliation process, have led Erdoğan to conclude that playing nice with Putin has its benefits. For his part, the Russian leader has taken advantage of this strategic opening.

The U.S. refusal prompted Ankara to finalize a deal to procure the S-400 air defense system units from Russia in September 2017, having already paid a deposit of \$2.5 billion. According to the Turkish leadership, Moscow brought forward a better deal enclosing technology transfers<sup>104</sup>, which Washington was not willing to consider. It would grant the

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<sup>102</sup> Jayamaha, B., Matissek, J. (2019) NATO at a Crossroads: Why Turkey is Becoming Such a Problem for the Alliance. *Modern War Institute* [Online] June 7

<sup>103</sup> Stefanovic, D. (2019) Turkey's perennial strategic importance and the S-400 saga. *AIES* [Online] Fokus, 10

<sup>104</sup> The chief of the Russian state corporation Rostec, which produces the S-400 systems, affirmed that the technology transfer was not arranged with Turkey. Without it, Ankara is susceptible to accumulate high costs and

buyer insights into how the system operates precisely, eventually providing a country with the means of replicating it. Moreover, selecting Russia as an alternative supplier breaks the Western monopoly over arms sales and strict control over its use. Ankara signed the accord with Moscow despite American concessions<sup>105</sup>, and four U.S. senators writing a New York Times op-ed to assert their objection to the Turkish acquisition of both a Russian S-400 missile system and American F-35 advanced fighter aircraft. Already in April 2019, the US had halted the shipment of F-35 fighter jet parts to Turkey due to security concerns that the S-400 could serve as a trojan gathering highly critical intelligence data on NATO's military equipment, and that it could damage the fighter's stealth abilities. As a NATO professional interviewee ascertained at the time, even if attempts were made to confine it as a bilateral Turkey–U.S. issue, “*it will entail that operations and operational exercises will be conducted in parallel, not jointly*” (Lindgaard, Pieper, 2020: 10). Thus, Turkey's S-400 deal would have direct ramifications on NATO's operational integration, even if Ankara has insisted that the F-35s and S-400s would be operated geographically separated, guaranteeing that it would be under Turkish supervision and proposing the formation of a joint commission to dispel any doubts about the future use of the system.

The punitive measures that the United States levied on Turkey in retaliation to its S-400 purchase are unprecedented in post–Cold War bilateral relations. Not only did the US threaten Turkey with the introduction of sanctions under Section 231 of CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) directed at blocking Russian defense sales, but also to terminate Turkish participation in the international consortium of countries that had developed the F-35 advanced fighter aircraft program. If the former implies considerable risks to Turkey's already fragile economy, the latter evicts Turkey of F-35s, and would also be detrimental to Turkish defense firms. Notably, sanctions on Turkey are likely to provide a scapegoat, namely the United States and NATO, for the country's economic downturn, causing irreparable heights in anti-Western sentiment among the Turkish people (Yegin, 2019: 4).

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encounter technical difficulties; it has yet to make progress on space technologies, detection, or exo-atmospheric missile interception. Russian media also disclosed that Russia would not provide Turkey with access to the command and control, maintenance, and software of the S-400 system. Hence, the technology would be “black boxed” so as to avoid NATO access to sensitive Russian technology. Tol, G., Goren, N. (2017) Turkey's Quest for Air Defense: Is the S-400 Deal a Pivot to Russia? *Middle East Institute* [Online] Policy Focus 5, December, p. 5

<sup>105</sup> The concessions made by the USA and NATO range from discounted Patriot Air Defense Systems to assurance that the YPG would be cleared from Syrian territory along the Turkish border so as not to threaten Turkey. US Special Envoy to Syria James Jeffrey even offered to do without tactical alliances with the Kurds – thereby prejudicing all Western credibility with the Kurds on the ground – hoping to get Erdoğan to cancel the S-400 deal. Instead, the Turkish President once again publicly announced that there would be “*no backtracking on S-400 deal with Russia.*” See Jayamaha, Matissek, 2019.

Public opposition in Turkey may contest future collaboration – even those based on mutual interest – between Ankara and other NATO allies. Outraged, the Turkish minister of defense proclaimed that the U.S. sanctions should target its enemies rather than an ally.

During this period, Moscow moved up the delivery date of the S-400s from the first quarter of 2020 to the second half of 2019, to deepen the cleavage between Erdoğan and the US Congress. On July 12<sup>nd</sup>, 2019 the first batch of components for the Russian-built S-400 surface-to-air missile system was delivered<sup>106</sup>, defying threats from the USA that it would be cut from the F-35 stealth fighter program. As White House spokeswoman Stephanie Grisham clarified, "*Turkey has been a longstanding and trusted partner and Nato ally for over 65 years, but accepting the S-400 undermines the commitments all Nato allies made to each other to move away from Russian systems.*" At the same time she stressed that, "*the United States still greatly values our strategic relationship with Turkey.*"<sup>107</sup> The system was reportedly tested for the first time in the coastal city of Sinop on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020.<sup>108</sup>

Turkish government circles have presented the recent procurement as instrumental in gaining more autonomy from and better bargaining power with Western allies. Reacting to concerns expressed by General Petr Pavel, the chairman of NATO's Military Committee, about Turkey's plans to attain the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli maintained, "*We can buy weapons from whoever we want, and we never have to justify this to NATO. . . . We're not looking at NATO but Qandil. We're engaged in a life and death struggle with murderers. What measures did NATO take against [the Fethullah Terrorist Organization's] July 15 coup attempt, what preventive measures has NATO put into effect?*" (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al., 2020: 170). Analysts close to the AKP also voiced domestic purposed related to foreign policy. In this way, the S-400s would serve to protect Erdoğan from a domestic attack, particularly from the air forces. Besides, Russia is expected to defend Erdoğan in the case of another putsch. Lastly, confrontation with the West over seeking more autonomy in the international arena and making sovereign decisions delivers a rallying effect for President Erdoğan, whose priority is to inhibit possible challengers to his leadership from gaining momentum. This is especially true with nationalism on the rise in Turkey.

Western capitals fear the purchase is a snub to the Alliance and the latest index of Turkey's

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<sup>106</sup> Al Jazeera (2019) *First shipment of Russian S-400 systems delivered to Turkey* [Online] 12 Jul

<sup>107</sup> BBC (2019a) *US removes Turkey from F-35 fighter jet programme* [Online] 17 July

<sup>108</sup> Gall, C., Schmitt, E. (2020) Turkey Moves Closer to Activating its Russian Air Defense System. *The New York Times* [Online] Oct. 30

pivot to Russia. On the contrary, the accord does not signal a strong Turkey–Russia strategic partnership and further alienates its NATO allies, while providing Moscow more leverage over Ankara (Tol, Goren, 2017: 1). The Turkish decision could paradoxically lead to a “dual dependence” on both Russia and NATO, characterized by a vulnerability vis-à-vis the former and a growing need for assurances from the latter. Erdoğan has thus precipitated Turkey into a strategic impasse on all sides.

As Moscow takes an aggressive stance in Turkey’s immediate neighborhood in Syria, Turkey is frustrated with NATO over what it sees as foot-dragging on security assistance. Considering Russia as one of the biggest threats to its national security, Turkey is thus refining ties with it. Even after Turkey apologized for the Su-24 incident, contentious developments in bilateral relations continued. Moscow did not reverse all sanctions immediately, as a reminder of its displeasure. Furthermore, it did not reinstate visa-free travel for Turkish citizens and still upholds some punitive measures, such as blocking the import of some Turkish agricultural goods (Yegin, 2019: 3). In effect, Turkey’s S-400 deal puts to test Ankara’s room for maneuver and unveils more challenges than benefits. First of all, the use of the S-400 system may be subject to Russian influence and manipulation in a way that imperils Turkish interests. Being a sophisticated weapon system, the producer retains the possibility to meddle with and hinder the use of the system. Ankara may demand further, costlier assistance from the Alliance to reduce hostile Russian actions. Additionally, having no access to NATO’s supply of essential weapons, Turkey may be forced to rely on the Russian defense industry. To illustrate this, Erdoğan has reportedly been assessing buying Russian Su- 35s or Su- 57s in case of the cancellation of F- 35 deliveries.<sup>109</sup>

Frustrated with Washington’s reluctance to finalize a deal on favorable terms, Ankara sought to exploit the S-400 procurement as leverage to achieve potential Turkish Patriots from the USA, encompassing technology transfers, at an optimum price. More broadly, in light of the harsh responses of the United States to Turkey’s previous deal attempt for Chinese missiles, the Turkish administration expected to use S- 400s as a bargaining chip with President Trump to bring about the intended outcomes on the following controversies inherited from the Obama administration: Fethullah Gülen’s presence in the US, the YPG’s role in Syria, and the violation of Iran sanctions by Turkish banker Mehmet Hakan Attila (Yegin, 2019: 4). Anyway, Turkey appears to have reached the limits of its negotiating position. In fact, its decision has helped

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<sup>109</sup> Kravchenko, S., Meyer, H. (2019) Russia Is Trying to Sell Turkey Its Own Stealthy New Fighter After U.S. Revoked Access to F-35. *TIME* [Online] August 27

create an almost complete bipartisan consensus on placing more weight on punitive measures in both chambers of the U.S. Congress.

In Soli Özel's words, "*The purchase of the S-400s was a fairly major act of defiance to the alliance*" (Lindgaard, Pieper, 2020: 10). Yet, as Yegin (2019: 2) clarifies, alliance endurance is not sustained with policy preference harmony, but with alliance dependence, found on meeting security demands. So, except alliance dependence ceases, a divergence between Turkey and other NATO members serve to propel inter-alliance bargaining and does not axiomatically signify alliance termination. Bearing this in mind, Turkey would not imperil the NATO-provided peace and deterrence in a volatile, adversarial neighborhood where threats – including Russia-originated ones – abound and its regional ambitions magnify. Tactic cooperation between Turkey and Russia notwithstanding, the chances for a new strategic axis between the two countries is unlikely. Rather, NATO remains a valuable asset for Turkey, even in cultivating its relations with Russia, considering membership alleviates the threat of domination by Moscow. From NATO's perspective, too, Turkey's departure from the alliance and the possibility that it could act in unison with Russia in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean would constitute a serious setback. In NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's words, "[...] *So, I'm not underestimating the difficulty related to S-400, but I'm saying that Turkey, as a NATO member, is much more than S-400.*"<sup>110</sup> Asked about frequent calls for expelling Turkey from NATO, he reaffirmed, "*Turkey is an important NATO member. And no ally has raised that issue at all, because they, we all see that we are dependent on each other.*"

In the absence of explicit legal provisions for expelling an ally, and given the potential rippling effects of such a singular decision, there is no apparent reason for Turkey to exit NATO since its membership only offers advantages and strategic clout (Stefanovic, 2019, p.3).

## **2.2 Turkey and Russia: bilateral relations**

As Carlo Frappi (2018) condensed, because of geopolitical affinities, both in physical and human terms, Turkish and Russian foreign policies are united by an innate "*multi-regional projection stretching throughout the Eurasian land-mass from the Western Balkans to the Central Asian steppes, where their interests, at different times, have collided, competed or converged.*"<sup>111</sup> Such a multi-regional dimension has featured consistently in the post-bipolar re-

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<sup>110</sup> NATO (2019) *NATO: The Transatlantic Alliance at 70. Conversation with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Aspen Security Forum* [Online]

<sup>111</sup> Frappi, C. (2018) *The Russo-Turkish Entente: A Tactical Embrace Along Strategic and Geopolitical Convergences*. In: Talbot, V., *Turkey: towards a Eurasian shift?* [Online] ISPI. Ledizioni LediPublishing, p. 45

assessment of both countries' foreign policy, overlapping and interweaving with the national identity knot, in turn deriving from the legacy of the multi-national empire experience and its traumatic transition, as well as from the geographic-civilizational location. A basic commonality in the countries' strategic cultures resides in the military and territorial conception of national security, originating from a longstanding sense of geographic insecurity. This was, therefore, aggravated by the sense of encirclement owing to hostile neighbors, apt to take advantage of Russia and Turkey's weaknesses to advance their agendas to the formers' detriment. During imperial times, the struggle to stabilize porous borders in the absence of natural frontiers – especially on the Western front – presided over the Russian securitization of society. Although profiting from more defined external borders – at least in natural terms, and at least on three out of five fronts – Turkey came to share a similar perception of geographic insecurity and, accordingly, the tendency to militarize society. Furthermore, the Turkish and Russian insecurity complex was fuelled by the countries' multi-ethnic and multi-national nature, and their respective fear of internal threats – equated with centrifugal forces and the extension of external ones – and transnationalism. Other behavioral patterns inherited from the common imperial past lie in Turkey and Russia's adherence to the balance of power principle and the resolve to safeguard the *status quo* by preventing the diplomatic isolation of local actors as well as by resisting foreign interventions as the soundest guarantees of systemic stability and national interest. These traditionally emerged in times of strategic retreat and declining power.

At the end of the Cold War, both countries found themselves at the center of hotspots of instability. Turkey's perimeter of uncertainty extended to the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the Black Sea basin. The proliferation of threats along its borders was additionally exasperated by the resurgence of the external-internal security short-circuit following the Kurdish drive toward gaining autonomy in Northern Iraq after the Gulf War. As for Russia, the explosion of conflicts in the post-Soviet space, besides the lack of Russian-led security arrangements in the neighborhood, gave rise to the possibility that the security vacuum left by the Soviet Union's dissolution might be filled by hostile powers. Entering the contemporary international scenario affected by "status panic" (Frappi, 2018: 45) after decades of strategic marginalization springing from the Cold War's ideological orthodoxy, Turkey and the Russian Federation have interpreted the foreign policy-making process as a highly symbolic ground for the rethinking of their role and status. The regionalization of the international system has entitled the diplomatic policy of Russia and Turkey to transcend the mere bilateral interaction level to embrace the broader systematization

of the Eurasian chessboard. The tie sealing Ankara and Moscow's policies in their shared neighborhood became the joint proposition of a "regional ownership" principle, whereby countries situated in the same area are called upon, in Davutoğlu's words, "*to end regional solutions to their regional problems, rather than waiting for other actors from outside the region to impose their own solutions*"<sup>112</sup>. Nowhere has this been more successful than in the Black Sea basin, where from 2001 Russia and Turkey developed robust mechanisms for naval cooperation against U.S. pressure to broaden to the basin the NATO naval anti-terror operations conducted in the Mediterranean under Operation Active Endeavor. The Russian quest for *derzhavnost* (great power identity) and fear of demotion mirror Turkey's entrenched "right and duty of involvement" in regional affairs, informing the countries' view of the current international order and support of its multipolar development at the expenses of Western multilateralism. Aydıntaşbaş and Kirişci (2017: 14) contend that the "*axis of the excluded*" is entrenched precisely in the wary approach toward the Western liberal order, the common concern about "color revolutions", and conflicting interests with the West in their "near abroad".

Turkey and Russia have diametrically opposite strategic interests – or rather similar, therefore inevitably conflicting – but substantially coincident tactical needs. Analogous views of the risks and opportunities emanating from the post-Cold War era, in tandem with domestic enabling factors – such as strong charismatic leadership and economic growth – encouraged the opening up of margins of cooperation in several key areas: energy, trade, security in the South Caucasus, relations with the Middle East, and Europe. In an attempt to adjust their flawed foreign policy-setting utterly centered on hard-security considerations, Ankara and Moscow have economized their external relations, capitalizing on their scope of cooperation along a double compartmentalization logic. The latter consists of insulating tactical, transactional interests from persistent political divergences, in order to escape direct confrontation. Importantly, the pillar upon which the Turkish-Russian embrace is built incorporates both the contingent strength of cooperation and the deepest motives for its structural weakness.

### 2.2.1 The Russian roulette

Turkey and Russia share a long, profound tradition of unease and mistrust. Throughout the six centuries of their domination (1299–1922), the Ottomans ruled over all twelve of their present-day neighbors, except Russia and Iran (Cagaptay, 2020: 137). However, Ankara is not afraid of

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<sup>112</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012) *Interview by Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu published in AUC Cairo Review (Egypt) on 12 March 2012* [Online]



Tehran but is certainly concerned about Moscow. In fact, the rise of the Russian Empire has been the historical reverse of the decline of the Ottoman Empire. As tsars expanded their control southwards during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they conquered vast territories belonging to the Ottomans, such as the southern and northern Caucasus, parts of southern Russia, eastern and southern Ukraine, as well as Crimea. Moreover, Russian policies paved the way for the demise of the Ottoman Empire, especially from the nineteenth century onwards, culminating, directly or indirectly, in the breakaway of Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire, as well as in aiding Montenegro and Romania gain international recognition internationally and territorial enlargement. Instigators and victors in each of the seventeen wars the two empires fought between 1568 and 197, the Russians murdered many inhabitants of the Ottoman lands and expelled the rest to Ottoman Turkey, to the point that a popular Turkish adage recites: “*If you scratch a Turk, you get a Circassian persecuted by Russian underneath*” (Cagaptay, 2020: 138). One of the chief drivers of Turkish foreign policy, the deeply ingrained fear of Russia’s military prowess is profoundly reflected in the process of Westernization ensuing the Russian 1783 capture of Crimea – the first Muslim-majority territory the Ottomans lost to a Christian power. The Ottoman sultans’ choice to pursue security with Great Britain for much of the nineteenth century, a strategy that dismissed Russian advances toward the Ottoman capital for what was left of the empire’s course, equally traces its root in the Russian military might as a catalyst. Finally, this helped trigger Turkey’s Western pivot after the Second World War and ensuing embrace of NATO, occurring after Joseph Stalin demanded in 1945-46 that Ankara hand over a portion of north-eastern Turkey and authorize the USSR to establish bases on the strategically located Turkish Straits.

The exigency to defuse the resulting polarization trends and to earn a more even balance between the global and regional dimensions of their respective foreign policy amounts to the first factor opening up to a path of engagement in Turkish–Russian relations. In May 1992 Turkey’s then Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel historically made the first visit to the Russian capital since the establishment of modern Turkey in 1923. A few years later, the Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin reciprocated the gesture, declaring Moscow’s intent to become strategic economic partners. The 1997 visit generated the first underwater trans-Black Sea natural gas pipeline between Turkey and Russia, named Blue Stream, and inaugurated in 2005. For Ankara, the Russian gas supply channel constitutes an indispensable source to satisfy domestic demand for primary energy – as it provides nearly half of Turkey’s natural gas and oil imports as of 2019 (Cagaptay, 2020: 142) – and a key resort to promote its advocated regional hub role. By maximizing supply channels and import volumes, Turkey may re-export the

surplus, thereby reducing the high costs associated with import dependency and elevating its own strategic value to Eurasia's energy-producing and consuming countries (Frappi, 2018: 58). Vice-versa, at a time when traditional gas commercialization schemes are more and more challenged by innovations in extractive techniques as well as in marketing technologies – that is, by the growth in LNG supply, by shale gas potential, and by spot markets – from Russia's perspective Turkey stands as a strategic market in terms of both current and prospective demand for natural gas. Moreover, Ankara represents a vital bridgehead to the Southern European gas markets, simultaneously circumventing transit through Ukrainian territory and the tightening EU energy normative. It is against this backdrop that the energy strategies and interests of Russia and Turkey were welded together by the 2014 agreement on the construction, along the Black Sea route, of the off-shore Turkish Stream gas pipeline, on the ashes of the discarded South Stream project.

Besides contributing to the noteworthy rise in annual economic turnover, the broadening of their economic interdependence enabled the partners to widen and deepen synergies beyond the major state-owned enterprises—in *primis* the national energy companies. In particular, the Turkish construction businesses, a vibrant sector in the economy since the Ozal reforms in the 1980s, took advantage of the new opportunities offered by the former Soviet republics, as well as Russia. Today, Russia is Turkey's number-one trading partner. In 2017, the number of Russian tourists surpassed the Germans, traditionally the largest nationality among visitors to Turkey since the beginning of mass tourism in the country under Özal. Turkish business groups profiting from booming bilateral trade, including those in the construction, retail, telecommunications, banking, tourism, glass and machinery industries, food and beverage, are now advocating for stronger political ties with Moscow to amplify their access to the Russian market and take advantage of further energy deals. Epitomizing the improvement in Russian–Turkish ties, Turkish Airlines offers daily flights from Istanbul to eight Russian cities.

In the Russian and Turkish view, the renewed emphasis placed on the economic dimension did not amount to an end in itself but to a course followed for the sake of autonomy, state power, and global position (Frappi, 2018: 55). It is not by chance that both Ankara and Moscow did not sustain and compound economic growth with a parallel process of domestic liberalization. Quite on the contrary, the verticalization of state management – maintained in Turkey and enhanced in Russia – allowed for more efficient use of key national economic assets to guarantee greater tactical coherence for its traditional foreign policy tools.

The gradual convergence in interests and perspectives by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century was the combined consequence of exogenous factors and the maturation of the domestic identity

debate. As for the first aspect, the common upholding of the *status quo* against revisionist tendencies shaped similar Russian and Turkish reactions to the U.S. unilateralist and interventionist position following 9/11, and to the two pillars validating the Bush Doctrine—i.e. the preventive war and the democracy promotion tenets. As regards the second element, the cyclic and polymorphous institutional, economic, and identity crises affecting the West, along with the simultaneous ascent of China, yielded an eastward shift of the center of gravity. International politics positioned both Turkey and Russia at the heart of the Eurasian landmass and, by extension, of the international system. According to the constructivist approach of IR, the renovated centrality characterizing the countries' self-perception should not be understood in merely physical, strategic terms, but also in cultural and civilizational ones, namely of being rejected by the West. Both Turks and Russians are prone to think that Europe is unfair to two major countries on its flanks that, as they interpret it, buffer the continent from an array of threats emanating from the south and the east.<sup>113</sup> Consistently, a causal relationship between the country's geographic, strategic, and cultural uniqueness came to justify Russia's natural *droit de regard* in the same scenarios. In the same way, Turkey shifted from the periphery to the core of the international system, i.e. from being a "European outpost" or a "wing country" in the bipolar system to becoming a "nerve center".

Putin and Erdoğan also share a personal relationship at the leadership level due to mutual affinity based on authoritarian styles. During Putin's visit to Turkey in December 2004, the two countries signed accords for cooperation in the defense and energy industries. In addition, they issued a declaration for "deepening friendship and multidimensional partnership". In a symbolic gesture before Putin's visit, Istanbul police detained a number of people accused of being Chechen militants. In return, Russia affirmed it was examining Turkish demands to put the PKK on its list of terrorist groups. Therefore, some inside the AKP wrongfully assumed that, unlike the EU or the United States, Russia saw Turkey as an equal partner. Some even conceived of enhanced relations with Russia as a useful counterweight to ties with the EU and the United States as Ankara ran into problems with Brussels during the EU accession talks or with Washington during the war in Iraq. Importantly, Moscow, historically the dominant side in the Russian–Turkish relationship, holds the opposite view of Turkey: "*Russia and Putin do not see Turkey and Erdoğan, respectively, as partners, let alone equals*" (Cagaptay, 2020: 143). Moscow's overarching energy-related objective concerning Ankara has been to gain Turkey as a key client, as it consumes large amounts of Russian natural gas until it becomes overwhelmingly reliant on Russia. In other words, the Kremlin has

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<sup>113</sup> De Waal, T. (2016) Russia, Turkey, and a Multipolar World. *Carnegie Europe* [Online] August 30

*de facto* used oil and natural gas supplies and the politics of building pipelines in order to project power in its near abroad or punish countries – such as Ukraine – that cross its foreign policy goals. The 2008 Russia–Georgia war over South Ossetia displays Russia’s use of trade as a point of leverage to extract geopolitical concessions from Turkey highlighting Turkey’s weakness vis-à-vis Russia. The five-day war brought relations between the United States and Russia to their lowest point since the Cold War, and Turkey was caught between its NATO ally and Russia. When the US sent military ships to the Black Sea to furnish humanitarian aid to Georgia, Moscow pressured Ankara to demand that the US warship leave the area. Russian officials then proceeded to strand Turkish trucks with traded goods at the Russian border for weeks and, despite threats from Ankara to retaliate, Turkey could not respond. However, the incident was well noted by Ankara (Tol, Goren, 2017: 1).

## 2.2 An unknown unknown?

### *Russia’s Syria strategic surprise*

Before the wave of the Arab uprisings, the Middle Eastern scenario was relegated to the margins of Russian–Turkish cooperation, despite the shared original rationale to abide by the general principles guiding the entente. Nonetheless, the course of the regional events – and, particularly, the protracted conflict in Syria – gradually raised Turkish and Russian stakes, exposing conflicting interests and views concerning the area’s stabilization and entangling the partners on opposing sides of the Syrian equation. Maximizing a decade of improved soft power to promote a regional leadership role, Ankara subscribed to a regime change agenda that took Turkey to the forefront of the “revisionist camp”, inclusive of both Western and Sunni powers. In doing so, Ankara clashed with Moscow’s antithetical intent to keep the *status quo* unaffected and, together, to complement its regional alignments along the Damascus-Baghdad-Tehran axis.

A game-changer in the Syrian civil war, the Russian military intervention, which began in September 2015, took even the most prominent analysts of the Kremlin’s foreign policy by surprise. In fact, Russia had consistently reiterated the need for a political solution and intended to refrain from any overt use of military force. And yet that is precisely what occurred. Resulting from an extraordinary confluence of political and military factors, Russia’s Syria gambit enabled it to earn several geostrategic gains: it impeded regime change, entrenched Russia further in the region and at the gates of NATO’s Southern Flank and, most importantly, it enabled Moscow to position itself as an indispensable global player, claiming a status on par with Washington. In fact, Russian activities in Syria advanced Russia’s image as a more successful interlocutor than the US. In the words of a Middle East leader “*The Russians are*

*now a dominant—perhaps the dominant— power in the Middle East”*.<sup>114</sup>

The Russian military buildup in Syria has been particularly alarming for Ankara. After its military deployment in Latakia, Syria, Russia currently encircles Turkey with Anti-Access/Air Denial (A2D2) bubbles to the country’s north in Crimea, south in Latakia, and east in Armenia. Russian warplanes violated Turkish airspace various times during Moscow’s bombing campaign in Syria directed at backing the Assad regime. Additionally, the Turkish military protested that Russian missile systems badgered Turkey’s warplanes patrolling the Syrian border. The Turkish foreign ministry also summoned the Russian ambassador several times, complaining that unidentified MiG-29 had harassed Turkish jets (Tol, Goren, 2017: 2). Erdoğan’s apology letter sent to his Russian counterpart and visit to Moscow following the 2015 incident exposed Turkey’s impotence to bear the economic and political costs of the confrontation – especially at a time of looming economic crisis, rising diplomatic isolation and reigniting of the domestic-external Kurdish threat perception – and validated the asymmetrical nature of the partnership and the gap in respective sources of leverage. Looking retrospectively at the crisis’s unraveling, it is worth noting that, in spite of mutual threats to retaliate by downgrading energy cooperation, Russia’s supply to Turkey went unaffected, proving the priority of the sector in supporting the resilience of the bilateral partnership. It is not by coincidence that the revitalization of the Turkish Stream pipeline project and acceleration of the normative process accompanying its realization surfaced as a privileged ground for diplomatic normalization (Frappi, 2018: 58).

The July 2016 failed coup attempt significantly accelerated this process, as it took place only two weeks after Ankara and Moscow began to patch up the seven-month crisis. Analysts expected that the understanding between the Turkish and Russian heads of state regarding Syria could eventually result in Turkish–Russian proximity in Syria. In fact, with U.S. retrenchment from the Middle East, Europe’s absence, and the return of Russia to the region, Turkey felt compelled to search for an alternative security partner and found it in Moscow. Taking into account the seemingly enduring U.S.–YPG relationship, Erdoğan started his drift to Russia in Syria, so that Putin would authorize him to undercut the YPG in Syria. As for the Kremlin, it has been adept at exploiting and heightening fissures within Turkey and among allies – including through an active media campaign – to present itself as a more reliable security and political partner (Flanagan, Larrabee, et al., 2020: xix). Since Erdoğan’s announcement regarding the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system, Putin has softened his policy toward

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<sup>114</sup> Jones, S. (2019) Russia’s Battlefield Success in Syria: Will It Be a Pyrrhic Victory? In: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2019) *CTC Sentinel* [Online] October, Volume 12, Issue 9.

Ankara in Syria, expertly exacerbating and prolonging Turkey's profound political crisis. Importantly, the Russian leader is playing the long game: he does not necessarily aspire to see Turkey leave NATO. Rather, he intends to dilute Ankara's commitment to NATO and hence enfeeble the Alliance's effectiveness.

Erdoğan's post-2016 move has consisted of brokering *ad hoc* deals with Putin, prioritizing the YPG, and slowly deviating from overthrowing Asad. This trend, as made evident by the spike in Putin–Erdoğan phone calls, has set in place a peculiar pattern in Turkish–Russian ties: almost every time the leaders talk, Putin advances his Syrian agenda in return for acquiescing to Erdoğan's program of weakening the YPG (Cagaptay, 2020: 148). For instance, in July 2016, when the Turkish President called for an expedition to Syria to subtract the Jarablus area from ISIS and drive a wedge between YPG-held areas in the northern part of the country, he had to assent to Moscow's (and Damascus') assault on rebel-held east Aleppo by pressuring the rebels to flee the city and mediating behind closed doors between the Asad regime and the rebels.

The differing interests of Russia and Turkey in Syria are bound to be a major obstacle to a real rapprochement. While Turkey perceives the ongoing widening to be consistent with re-ensuring coherence with (and mending the fences of) its Middle Eastern policy by lessening the risks associated with the regional sectarian polarization spiral, Russia is engaged in network diplomacy in an environment that is critical for the multi-regional balancing of the United States. The reciprocal benefits of the revived entente notwithstanding, the pivotal role played by the Kremlin in the negotiated settlement of the conflict as epitomized by the Astana process – officially put in motion in January 2017 to formalize Russian dialogue with Turkey and Iran, who side with a number of ground armed groups – once again testifies to the fact that cooperation between the two is uneven and skewed in Russia's favor. As a matter of fact, Putin has lobbied to assign the PYD a place at the table, a stance to which Erdoğan is stridently contrary, and has personally invited the party to inaugurate an office in Moscow (Cagaptay, 2020: 151). Today, the official opinion in Russia does not consider the PKK and its-affiliated PYD as terrorist organizations. Rather, Moscow holds a traditional patronage relationship with the Kurdish population. Part of Russian imperial policy in the course of the nineteenth century involved forging bonds with the Kurds of the Ottoman Empire. Between the 1870s and the Ottoman collapse in the Great War, Russia twice pressed deeply into the heartland of Anatolia, and, while many Kurdish tribes fought for the Ottoman sultan, others sided with the tsars. In modern times, the Soviet Union supported the PKK, which became a formidable military force under Russian tutelage in the Syrian-occupied Lebanese Beqaa Valley during the 1980s.

In conclusion, whether Turkey and Russia can reach a new *modus vivendi* or will continue to get by in a mix of conflict and cooperation will likely depend on the Russian stance on Kurdish autonomy and military presence in Syria, and on Turkish willingness to accept escalating Russian ambitions and Syrian-led requests, such as vacating strategic territories in northern Syria currently occupied by Turkish-backed rebels. Moscow will proceed so as to ensure that Ankara does not emerge a winner in the Syrian chessboard. Regardless of his closeness to Erdoğan, Putin holds many cards over his adversary and aspires to humiliate him in order to remind the Turks why they should keep their fear of Russians. A resurgent Russia stands as Turkey's historic nemesis owing precisely to Erdoğan's unsuccessful strategy. Although the Turkish President will do his best to placate Moscow, Russia's sizable military and nuclear arsenal continue to pose the biggest menace to Turkey. Hence, Western onlookers and policy-makers should take note of a valuable historic dynamic: Turkey reacts to Russian military might.

#### *The Nagorno Karabakh "frozen conflict"*

Turkey's bid for influence in Muslim countries expands north of the "Bayram–Eid" line, based on the distinct words Turks and Arabs use respectively to refer to the Islamic High Holiday (Cagaptay, 2020: 249). These naming differences provide unexpected insight into Ankara's sway as a Muslim power, as it successfully projected soft power through historic and cultural ties to the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Black Sea region – the "Bayram Belt" – while failing to exercise hard power in the Middle East and North Africa—the "Eid Belt". The nations and ethnic groups belonging to the former include, among others, Azeris in the south Caucasus, Bashkir and Tatars in Russia, and Kazakh, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks in Central Asia. Across the Bayram Belt, Erdoğan has returned as a patron to the Muslim-populated states in the Western Balkans, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. He has also exploited Ankara's ties with Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, and Moldova (previously Ottoman domains for centuries) to push back against a renascent Moscow in the Black Sea region. At last, he has pivoted to Central Asia, a region where Russia has refocused its energies as a chief hegemon.

In the Cold War period, the fear of the Soviet superpower next door trumped Ankara's proclivity to aid Turks' ethnic kin overseas, as emerges from the comparison with Turkey's policy of harboring Uyghur nationalists in communist China over the same period. Ankara kept the distance from Turkic and Muslim republics under Russian control inside the USSR, including Azerbaijan, whose inhabitants speak a Turkic language, among the closest to Turkish of all the Turkic languages. Traditionally, Turkey rebuffs Moscow's control of Turkic nations

only when the latter is weak. Therefore, in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union, Ankara swiftly infiltrated Central Asia and the Caucasus to build influence among the Turkic republics.

Recently, the broader Turkey–Russia relationship has been tested again in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. After nearly three decades of the fragile ceasefire that terminated the 1988–1994 war in which Armenia captured from neighboring Azerbaijan the Armenian-inhabited Nagorno Karabakh besides seven adjacent districts creating a territorial buffer around NK, tensions resumed between the two countries on September 27th, 2020.<sup>115</sup> Azerbaijan never digested its defeat and activated itself to modernize its army with ultramodern weaponry, imported notably from Israel as well as Russia. Violence often erupted along the line of contact, Baku making modest gains in 2016.<sup>116</sup> The ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan was never fully implemented, and a peace agreement brokered by the so-called Minsk Group – led by its three co-chairs, Russia, France, and the United States within the OSCE framework – failed to materialize. The last significant steps in that direction – the Madrid principles – are to be traced back to 2007. With military and civilian losses on both sides numbering in the hundreds during this six-week war, Erdoğan’s support – jarring with the monotone calls for a ceasefire by US, European, Iranian leaders – was fundamental for turning the tide in favor of Azerbaijan. A red line was crossed and on November 10th, Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed to a Russian-mediated settlement. Under the trilateral agreement, Azerbaijan re-earns full control of all the occupied territory around Nagorno Karabakh, except for a five-kilometer-wide corridor in Lachin that holds a territorial link between defeated Armenia and Stepanakert but not Shusha. For the first time since the 1990s war, Azerbaijan also gained a direct connection to its exclave Nakhichevan, i.e. a transport link to Turkey. Azerbaijani refugees and internally displaced persons are allowed to return to their homes under the aegis of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Finally, the ceasefire agreement makes no mention of the future constitutional status of Nagorno Karabakh.

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<sup>115</sup> Tocci, N., Mikhelidze, N. (2020) Winners, Losers and Absentees in Nagorno Karabakh. *IAI* [Online] p. 1

<sup>116</sup> Bechev, D. (2020) Turkey, Russia and the escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh. *Middle East Institute* [Online] October 5



## Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal

- Armenian forces to withdraw by 15 Nov
- Armenian forces to withdraw by 1 Dec
- Area of deployment for Russian peacekeepers
- Armenian forces to withdraw by 20 Nov
- Areas regained by Azerbaijan in the war



**Fig.4: Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal**

Source: BBC (2020) *Armenia-Azerbaijan: Why did Nagorno-Karabakh spark a conflict?* [Online] 12 November. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54324772> [22/11/2020]

Far more surprising to external observers is not Azerbaijan's win, but Russia's. The latter repeatedly devoted effort toward brokering humanitarian ceasefires, as did Iran, the US, and France. In a historical first, Russia managed to send its – and only its – peacekeepers to the region. As a consequence, along the line of contact in Nagorno Karabakh and the Lachin corridor, a contingent of close to 2000 Russian troops will be deployed for a duration of five years, renewable for a further five. Not only does this give Russia unprecedented leverage to regulate the future constitutional fate of Nagorno-Karabakh, but it also authorizes Moscow to exert exceptional influence on the domestic politics of both sides, most importantly Armenia.

In spite of its close security and religious ties with the latter, over the last decade the Kremlin has upgraded its economic relationship with Azerbaijan, being its largest trading partner within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the third-largest global

trading partner after Italy and Turkey (Bechev, 2020). What's more, bilateral relations with Yerevan embittered after the 2018 revolution that brought Nikol Pashinyan to power. In all but name, Putin seems to have taken revenge for the Armenian Prime Minister's democratic reforms, timid overtures toward the European Union, and above all his fight against corruption, which brought about the arrests of former pro-Russian president Robert Kocharyan as well as several Russian-affiliated oligarchs. The Russian-negotiated deal dramatically precipitates Armenia into a political brink, jeopardizing its young democracy. Armenians have already erupted in mass protests, labeling the deal as betrayal and calling for Prime Minister Pashinyan's resignation, doing Russia a further favor. Overall, Karabakh serves as a negotiating asset with the West in Moscow's wider push for zero-sum influence, involving a June 2008 Russian proposal for a new European security framework that would, according to experts at the time, weaken NATO and the OSCE. In Putin's advisor Sergey Glazyev's words in late 2017, "*if we want peace in the Caucasus, we need to integrate the entire Caucasus into the Eurasian Union*" (Bechev, 2020). Hence, it is telling that in the current crisis Putin has been careful to emphasize Russia's good relations with both parties.

Indeed, Turkey's involvement helps Erdoğan score domestic points and a degree of regional credibility and complicates Moscow's position. As Tocci and Mikhelidze (2020: 2) cleverly put it, "*After a spring in which Turkey exed its military muscle in Libya and a summer in which it postured itself assertively in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara's autumn in the Caucasus seemed the main game in town.*" It is against this background that Erdoğan has formally asked the Grand National Assembly for authorization to send troops to Azerbaijan, as part of the monitoring mission of the agreement. With the deployment of its troops, the Turkish presidency intends to create a coordination center with Moscow for compliance with the peace plan. The Turkish troops will stop for a year in the secessionist enclave, as the Turkish leader does not intend to give Russia a free hand in controlling the disputed territory. Not by chance, the Kremlin has rapidly denied Turkey's claim that Moscow and Ankara were jointly monitoring the ceasefire deal.<sup>117</sup> Although it played a more decisive part during the last major escalation between Baku and Yerevan in April 2016, Moscow still pressured Ankara in other areas. Accordingly, Russia timely violated another ceasefire in Syria, with airstrikes killing dozens of Turkey-backed fighters in rebel-held Idlib, on the Turkish border. Moreover, the Syrian refugee flows issue renders Turkey extremely vulnerable.

Since a direct clash serves neither of the fair-weather friends, the Russian–Turkish competition

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<sup>117</sup> Khalid, T. (2020) Russia Denies Erdogan's Claim of Turkey jointly monitoring Nagorno-Karabakh deal. *Al Arabiya* [Online] 11 November

is expected to escalate across other theaters, such as Libya, through proxy warfare. Ultimately, whatever the outcome of the current hostilities, the two leaders will keep pushing Armenia and Azerbaijan away from the West as broader Russia–Turkey competition will continue to unfold beyond the South Caucasus.

### **2.3 Turkey’s Syria policy: Turkey first**

Strong of the success and certainty obtained in the first wave of the Arab revolts, Turkish policymakers overestimated benefits associated with being actively involved in Syria to steer the course of events in a manner that is desirable to Turkish interests.<sup>118</sup> Demir (2017: 42) asserts that the Turkish engagement in the Syrian crisis offers evidence of the effects of highly positive performance perception in prior decisions on sequential risk-taking behavior. Key predictions of the model he elaborated are, first, that a shock or past event will stimulate decision-makers; second, that the favorable outcome of their response to that event will inform future actions by inducing them to over-adjust themselves to their judgment and competence. Third, upon observing a set of signals akin to those of the past and boosting their confidence, decision-makers will be emboldened to take more risks. Lastly, since decision-makers’ risk attitudes are biased by overconfidence, their decisions will presumably result in failed commitments.

Anyway, Erdoğan’s political style is Janus-faced, both ideological and pragmatic in his stance on domestic and international affairs. Embracing his pragmatic side when he deems it convenient, the Turkish President has proven himself capable of course correction in foreign policy, as clearly emerges from the Syrian chessboard. As the latter continues to be an existential match, Ankara has shown that it is ready to play a “keeping a foot in both camps” game which implies reaching more bargaining power with both the USA and Russia in order to accommodate its power politics agenda (Pelino, 2018: 11). Flexibility allowed Turkey’s Syria policy to deftly fit in the framework of Neo-Ottomanism, Kemalism, and Turkish Gaullism.<sup>119</sup> Today, its chief challenge is to secure a say in the future order and reconstruction of Syria.

The *quid pro quo* that could spawn Turkish endorsement for a political settlement to the

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<sup>118</sup> Demir, I. (2017) *Overconfidence and Risk Taking in Foreign Policy Decision Making*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 41

<sup>119</sup> Turkey’s search of full independence, strategic leverage and *grandeur* can be best assimilated to French Gaullism. However, Turkey has never taken a radical step, such as withdrawing from NATO’s military integrated command as the French did in 1966. Instead of withdrawing from NATO, Turkey has aimed to utilize its NATO membership as a tool to maneuver in its Foreign Policy. Taşpınar, Ö. (2012) Turkey’s Strategic Vision and Syria. *The Washington Quarterly* [Online] 35:3

conflict has been evident since Ankara became a sponsor of the Astana process with Moscow and Teheran, and guarantor of one of the de-escalation zones it created—that is, that Turkey could accept a settlement on Damascus’s terms as long as Ankara’s concern as regards crippling Kurdish autonomy is protected. Since Turkey is critical to isolating the supply routes (mainly Bab al-Hawa) and foreign sanctuary that was bolstering the insurgency, Damascus is likely to strive for Turkish buy-in. The Turkish military presence – both in the north and in the positions surrounding the de-escalation zone of Idlib<sup>120</sup>, the last enclave of anti-regime resistance – seems destined to remain, at least as long as Ankara will not see its security concerns dealt with. The four operations – August 2016, January 2018, October 2019, February 2020 – on Syrian territory served precisely to offset what, in the eyes of Ankara, presents a serious threat to its national security, namely the formation along its southern border of a territorial strip under the control of the YPG. These “wars within a war”<sup>121</sup> are part of a Turkish strategy directed at achieving influence and control through a mix of military occupation and full-scale reconstruction underpinned by the logic of Turkification and the externalization of the domestic apparatus of the Turkish state. Permanently invalidating the gains of the Syrian Kurds may set the scene for Turkish annexation, or the formation of “breakaway regions” under Turkish protection. Moreover, Turkey’s territorial advances in Syria signal a strategic decoupling of Ankara from its Western partners, facilitated, according to Chatham House scholars (2019), by the lack of a coherent strategic vision, the Trump administration’s erratic decisions, and the EU’s weak stance on Syria where, except for British and French military forces, there are no EU “boots on the ground”.<sup>122</sup>

Aside from the Kurdish knot, another pressing matter in Syria is to avert a new flow of refugees on its border and in the meanwhile to facilitate the relocation of those currently present in Turkey. Many questions open up about the consequences of demographic engineering in Syrian areas under Turkish control in case the Turkish government necessitates a short-term relief valve to contain the increasing internal discontent with refugees.

Overall, Turkey’s recent conduct hints at its willingness to be flexible in its foreign policy

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<sup>120</sup> From February 2<sup>nd</sup> to date, more than 10,755 Turkish trucks and military vehicles arrived in the Syrian “de-escalation zone”, transferring tanks, armored vehicles, personnel carriers, mobile bulletproof, guard booths, and military radars. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2020) Turkey’s military build-up | Forces deploy near M4 road, and bring in new columns to “de-escalation zone” [Online] 6 Nov

<sup>121</sup> The international community has raised concerns over the possibility of ISIS and other insurgent elements capitalizing on further instability to regroup and rearm, thereby undoing the counterterrorism effort of the past six years.

<sup>122</sup> Stanicek, B. (2019) Turkey’s military operation in Syria and its impact on relations with the EU. *European Parliament Research Service* [Online] November

priorities in Syria, due to its limited policy options. Its present Realpolitik approach may be effectively summarized by Henry John Temple, 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount Palmerston's memorable quote: *"We have no eternal allies, and we have not perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow"* (Pelino, 2018: 11).

### 2.3.1 Turkey's shifting conduct in the Syrian civil war

As the uprisings broke out in Syria in the spring of 2011, many Turkish delegations tried to exhort the Asad regime to put an end to its brutal repression of the protests, while Turkey upheld the slowly forming Syrian opposition movement in Istanbul. This expresses a pronounced desire in Turkish foreign policy to drive the evolution of the Syrian conflict from its onset. Later, Ankara began to endorse the Syrian upheaval more explicitly and contributed to the transformation of the composite front of Syrian opposition groups into the Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul in August 2011. In September, it severed all diplomatic ties with the Syrian regime due to Asad's growing military oppression of the Syrian opposition. Henceforth, Turkey became fully committed to overturning the Asad regime and installing a Turkish-friendly regime in Syria. Its engagement was translated into two lines of approach. First, Ankara deepened its diplomatic efforts, by demanding an international intervention in the conflict and the establishment of "safe-zones" in Syria on account of the armed opposition. The statements of Turkish officials, such as Davutoğlu, implied that Turkey would only act in coordination with the international community, an endeavor that would ultimately prove vane due to the blocking of China and Russia toward foreign interventions in the conflict. Second, when it became clear that the United Nations was unable to come to a consensus on the Syrian conundrum, Turkey – jointly with the USA, France, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia – started providing the armed opposition with weapons, training, and logistical support under the patronage of the allied SNC and the Free Syrian Army (FSA).<sup>123</sup>

In winter 2013, the elevated influence of radical Islamist forces pushed the USA and UK to cease granting lethal-equipment deliveries to the Syrian opposition. From this point onwards, Turkey truly undertook Neo-Ottoman adventurism. Instead of abiding by its Western allies – who were becoming extremely worried they were aiding the very terrorist organizations they were willing to fight against – Turkey kept on backing Islamic extremist opposition factions by easing the delivery of Saudi and Qatari arms and equipment to radical groups, and tolerating the inflow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) into Syria through its southern borders for the sake of its regional ambitions. The manipulation of the Turkey–Syria border – serving as a gateway for some and as a barrier for others – and Erdoğan's employment of refugees from

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<sup>123</sup> D'Alema, F. (2017) The Evolution of Turkey's Syria Policy. *IAI* [Online] IAI Working Papers 17

Syraq as “weapons” (which the author will examine in Chapter 3) when he warned the EU that Turkey would open its border after members of the European Parliament voted for a temporary halt of membership talks in 2016, constitute a clear indicator of Erdoğan’s quest for an autonomous strategic position in the geopolitics of the Middle East (Pelino, 2018: 6).

The primary goal of toppling the Asad regime seemed inevitable in the summer of 2015, for a Turkish, Qatari, and Saudi-supported coalition of Islamist rebel groups was about to enter the Latakia province. However, the timely Russian intervention in September 2015 and enhanced Iranian involvement made the fall of the regime look unlikely. Considering the reality on the ground, in mid-2016 Ankara devoted itself to renouncing its Neo-Ottoman Adventurism approach. In his first speech in parliament on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Yildirim declared Turkey's turn toward a *Realpolitik* approach of "More friends, fewer enemies", in light of Turkey's position, isolated from both its Western allies and Russia (Pelino, 2018: 7).

US–Turkish relations were tense from the beginning of the conflict, as the USA declined reiterated calls by Ankara to enforce no-fly zones in Syria aimed at neutralizing the regime's air superiority. Moreover, with the rise of ISIS in the summer of 2014, Western interests in the region – particularly those of the US – started to conflict with those of Turkey. The Global Coalition against ISIS denounced Turkey for its reluctance to join the fight against the self-proclaimed “Caliphate” and its lack of responsibility for monitoring its borders to jihadist fighters from joining the group. In the end, international pressure, together with the constant threat of ISIS progressing along the Turkish border, urged Turkey to take part in the U.S.-led coalition against the group in September 2014. Subsequently, Turkish compliance with its NATO ally, the United States, remained ambiguous. On the one hand, Turkey renewed its call for the removal of Asad and pledged to collaborate fully with the USA in the aftermath of the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack and of the U.S. cruise-missile bombardment of a Syrian airbase in early April 2017. On the other hand, Turkish officials repeatedly asserted that the USA must stop supporting Kurdish forces. In June 2017, Erdoğan summarized the situation as follows: “*At one side we will be together in NATO but on the other side you will act together with terror organizations... Those so-called friends don’t see any issue walking along with terror organizations who want to divide Turkey... All of these moves are against NATO... In this case, the NATO treaty should be revised*” (Pelino, 2018: 8).

Turkey's relations with its historic rivals and Asad's allies – Russia and Iran – were already strained in the early stages of the conflict. On top of that, Turkish maneuvers in Syria were reduced for Russia’s military presence precluded Ankara from directly intervening on the side

of the rebels or combating ISIS. Turkey's quick attempt to normalize relations with Russia was followed by a shift of Ankara's priorities in Syria. Instead of pursuing regime change, Turkey committed itself to contrast the YPG along its border, or at least implementing a strategy of containment. The fight against ISIS instrumentally spread to eradicate the threat of attack posed by the group along Turkey's southern border, to win back international trust, and thereby earn increased political leverage against the YPG. Asad's deposition still prevailed as a major interest but was relegated to what could be defined as a "face-saving" policy for Turkey.

### 2.3.2 Turkish military incursions into Syrian territory

If NATO has largely remained a bystander to the conflict in Syria, Ankara's rapprochement with Moscow in June 2016 opened new policy options for Turkey that had previously been denied by the hostile Russian military presence. On August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Ankara launched "Operation Euphrates Shield" in a bid to build a secure corridor from the Turkish border to the town of al-Bab and, above all, to drive a wedge between Syria's Kurds, who sought to control the area to connect its two already contiguous cantons in north-eastern Syria – Kobani and Jazirah – with that in the north-west – Afrin – thus establishing a nearly 650 kilometer-long PKK belt across Turkey's southern border and ensuring the territorial continuity of Rojava. The military incursion was declared over on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2017, and was equally condemned by Russia and the US, who forced Turkey to give up on its ambitions of taking operations toward Manbij – one of the last YPG-controlled areas of Syria west of the Euphrates River – thereby significantly reducing the scope of the Turkish offensive. However, it is difficult to imagine that Ankara would have acted the way it did without a preliminary agreement with Russia, as it did not preclude the Turkish air force from conducting missions in Syrian airspace. To sum up, Operation Euphrates Shield allowed Turkey to have a foot in the door of Syria and assigned Ankara a seat at the table of any future talks or summits concerning a political settlement to the conflict in Syria. Overall, although the operation was a success, Turkey eventually had to call in US air support to complete it. Nevertheless, Erdoğan's determination to handle the YPG threat by himself proved to the USA that he had not given up on his vision to act independently of the Americans to guard Turkey's interests when he sees it necessary (Cagaptay, 2020: 219).

Similarly, two years later Putin gave Erdoğan the green light for Turkey to operate its air force over the Afrin bastion and then occupy it. As a reward for its tacit approval, Moscow received concessions from Ankara for an Asad-regime assault on eastern Ghouta. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, the TSK and the Turkish-backed FSA launched a military campaign designated "Operation Olive Branch" across its southern borders advancing west, north, and northeast into Syrian lands. The offensive ensued an announcement by the Pentagon that it would establish a

30.000 border guard in northern Syria for the purpose of blocking the resurgence of ISIS, with around half of that force comprising retrained fighters from the YPG-dominated SDF. While Prime Minister Yildirim contended that Turkey’s objective in Afrin was to “*create a 30-kilometer deep security belt*” that would avert analogous attacks in the future, Turkish chief of staff Hulusi Akar revealed a more ambitious goal admitting that “*the operation will continue until the last terrorist is neutralized in our region*” (Pelino, 2018: 8). On the very first day of OOB, Turkey flew nearly one-fourth of its fighter aircraft arsenal, the highest sortie-rates and the most intensive operational tempo in its cross-border military record in the last decade. In contrast to Operation Euphrates Shield – of which it constitutes a continuum – OOB was a *blitzkrieg* victory. The main combat phase ended on March 24<sup>th</sup>, when Turkish forces and Syrian fighters seized the last remaining villages and established full control of the city. In the aftermath of the operation, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) released it had reliable information that Turkey was carrying on “*an orchestrated demographic change*” to replace Kurds with displaced Arabs coming from eastern Ghouta—which the Syrian regime took control of in April (Pelino, 2018: 10). The YPG’s defeat in Afrin destroyed several American myths in relation to Erdoğan’s Syria policy, namely that the TAF would not hazard enter Syria following the setbacks it encountered in Jarablus; that Russia would not authorize Ankara to, again, enter Syria; that the YPG would stall Turkish forces in direct combat<sup>124</sup>; and eventually, that the Asad regime would back the YPG. The first of these conclusions led the USA to make commitments to Ankara in June 2018 to draw up a plan to transfer governance in Manbij from the YPG to its local inhabitants, including Kurds but ostracizing those affiliated with it or its associated political wing.

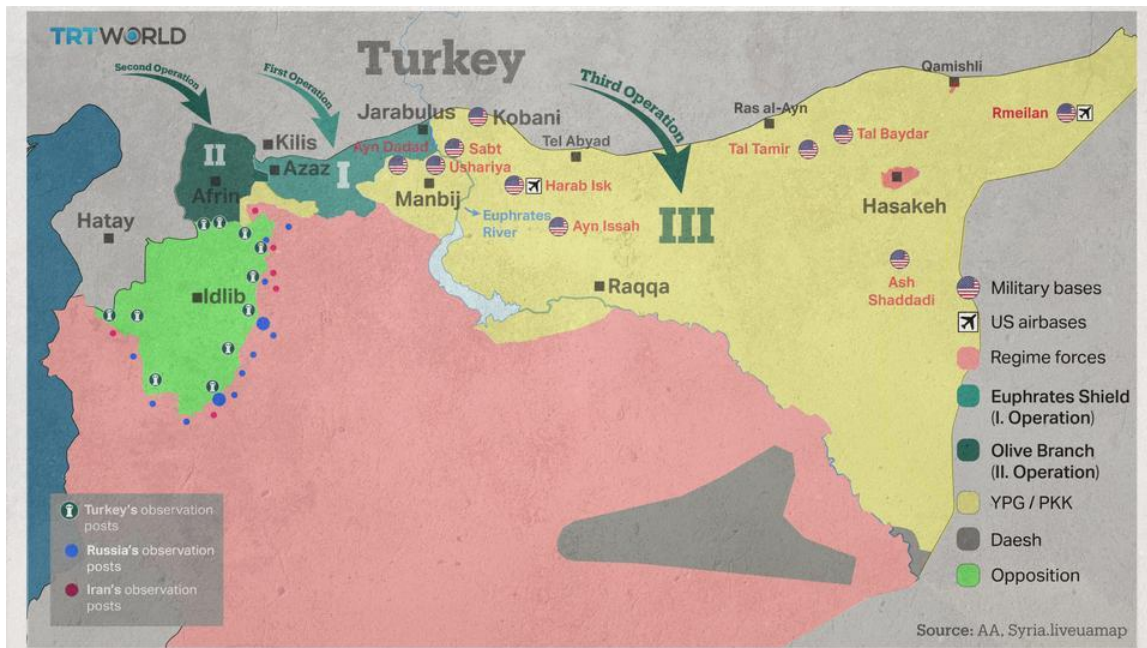
During the summer of 2019, the Turkish leadership pressed for the creation of a 30-kilometer “safe zone” running along Turkey’s southern frontier from the Euphrates to the Iraqi border, justified by the need to prevent terrorist attacks into Turkey, although most of the evidence indicated that PKK operations in Turkey were internally organized, or from PKK bases in Iraq—not from Syria. The breakpoint in Turkish–U.S. relations came on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, when President Trump communicated to his Turkish counterpart that U.S. troops stationed alongside their Kurdish allies would be withdrawn from the SDF zone. The Turkish side thus embarked upon its loudly signaled offensive in northern Syria – codenamed “Operation Peace Spring” – on October 9<sup>th</sup>, relying on regular army and air force units as well

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<sup>124</sup> Having received substantial stocks of modern weaponry by the US, the YPG had developed its urban warfare abilities.



as FSA militias, now known as the “Syrian National Army” (SNA).<sup>125</sup> Turkey’s counterterrorist campaign led to the unthinkable SDF and PYD’s decision to strike a deal with Damascus to jointly retaliate against Ankara’s offensive by allowing the Syrian Army to enter the SDF-held towns of Manbij and Kobani. The deal, brokered by Moscow, represents a dramatic shift away from the strategic *status quo* and, therefore, the alliance with Washington, most likely motivated by the relatively weak reaction of the US, previously a key Kurdish military partner, to Ankara’s rapidly expanding military campaign in Kurdish territories.<sup>126</sup>



**Fig.5: Mapping “Operation Euphrates Shield”, “Operation Olive Branch”, and “Operation Peace Spring”**

Source: TRTWorld (2018) *Mapping the targets of Turkey’s new military operation in northern Syria* [Online] Retrieved from: <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/mapping-the-targets-of-turkey-s-new-military-operation-in-northern-syria-22487> [22/11/2020]

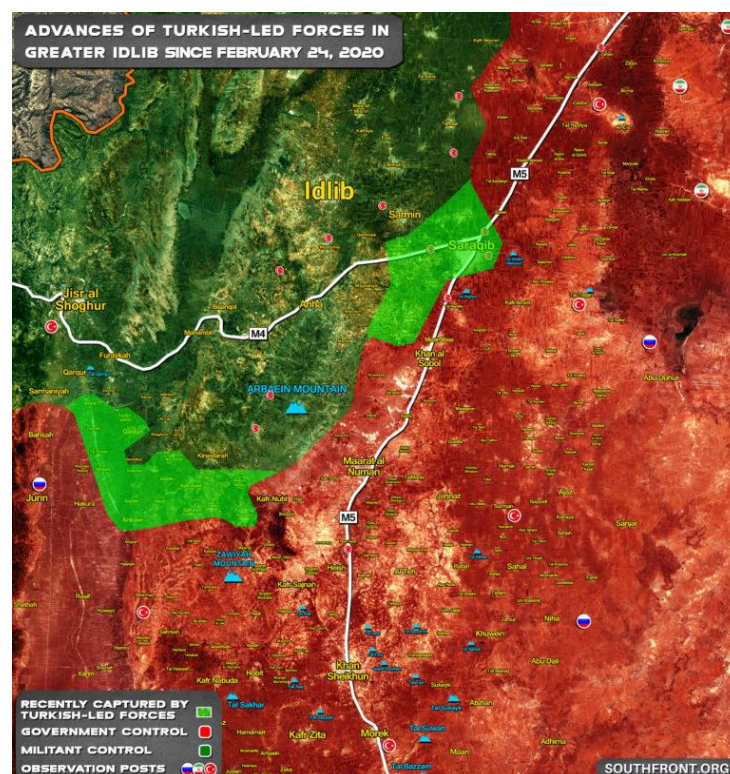
Finally, the operation in Idlib is Ankara's first real showdown, as it shows with unprecedented clarity the determination with which the Turkish Nation intends to take root in

<sup>125</sup> Russia and Iran were only too pleased with seeing the US forces depart, and for the Turks to win America’s former allies, the YPG. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it, “*Russian and Turkish military officials are in contact over the operation. Now, we will try to establish a dialogue between Damascus and Ankara.*” However, Turkey will be faced with a threefold challenge. First, any deal between Ankara and Damascus would be vehemently opposed by the FSA. Second, if Turkey refused a dialogue with Damascus, Moscow would exert maximum counter-pressure, generating a highly perilous situation for Turkey of being opposed by both Russia and Western states simultaneously. In the worst case scenario, a Russia-aided Asad could relaunch the PKK campaign in Turkey, with chronic consequences.

Hale, W. (2019) Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War. *INSIGHT Turkey* [Online] Vol. 21, No. 4, p. 38

<sup>126</sup> Solace Global (2019) *Operation Peace Spring. A new Syrian frontline?* [Online]

Syria, and that none of the actors involved in the Middle Eastern wars can afford to neglect Turkish interests. Turkey aimed to stop the Russo-Iranian offensive on the last scrap of Syria in the hands of the rebels and, hence, avert the humanitarian catastrophe embodied by the million and a half civilians who crowd the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, it was of fundamental importance for Erdoğan to give a show of strength by making all actors involved in Syria understand that Idlib represents the red line. Started immediately after the murder of 36 Turkish soldiers by the Russian Air Force on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020, “Operation Spring Shield” has partially upset the balance between Ankara and Moscow. Putin intended to see Erdoğan’s bluff, reveal the Reiss’s inability to flex its muscles. However, the Turkish president has dropped the game, as proved by the fact that Iran and Hezbollah, the patrons of what remains of the Syrian regime, have been forced to take a step back for the first time since September 2015—when Russia entered the Syrian war. In addition, the "Spring Shield" operation was a very successful test for the Anatolian war industry. Lastly, the Turkish offensive against "the murderer" – as Assad is known among the Sunnis of Syria, especially those who took refuge in Turkey and Jordan – has had an echo that goes far beyond Anatolia, strengthening the image of Erdoğan as "commander of believers" (*Amir al-Mu'minin*).



**Fig.6: Operation “Spring Shield”**

Source: Southfront.org (2020) *Advances of Turkish-led forces in Greater Idlib since February 24,2020*

<sup>127</sup> Santoro, D. (2020a) Perché Erdoğan ha lanciato lo “Scudo di primavera” in Siria. *Limes* [Online]

Erdoğan's ambitions are boundless. However, the conviction and military power exhibited by the Turkish nation in Idlib have significantly lessened the gap between objectives and resources. It is a remarkable development because since the failed coup of July 15<sup>th</sup> the rhetoric of the Turkish President has always translated into concrete actions.

#### **2.4 Ankara as Turkey's only axis**

The claim that Turkey might be changing its axis has been heard many times before. In particular, these alarmist statements gain resonance every time Turkish elites venture a diversification of their staunchly Euro-Atlanticist position in order to adjust to massively changing global conditions, and also to assure relative autonomy through regional securitization and balance of power, a *sine qua non* policy for any medium power. Moreover, it should be taken into consideration that deviations from an uncompromising Westernist stance have always echoed structural domestic developments in Turkey, harmonizing with the shift from a phase of national capitalism, characterized by statism and import substitution, toward the global capitalist system (Öktem, Kadioğlu, Karlı, 2012: xvii). By the turn of the century, this transition was accompanied by an aggressive export policy; the conversion from an allegedly homogenous, monist society into a diversified and pluralistic one; the progressive phasing out of orthodox Kemalism and military tutelage. These domestic changes were deeply interwoven with – and causally related to – the global processes of non-alignment, détente, the surge of state-groupings like the BRIC, the permutation from imperialist occupation to a global financial system, and, finally, the re-orientation of U.S. foreign policy in the passage from the Bush to the Obama administration.

In view of the extensive above analysis, it appears that the strategic question that Turkey poses to itself today is not whether it pays off to remain loyal to the United States or to enter the orbit of Russia and or China. By contrast, it is how to follow its *raison d'état* consistently. This implies a continuous strategic assessment on how to define its interests as accurately as possible, how to achieve the status of a great power, which actors are functional to the pursuit of this project, and who can provide it with the tools necessary for the realization of its own targets. Therefore, the question is not ideological, but geopolitical.<sup>128</sup>

At the origin of the problem are not the United States, Russia, or China, but Turkey itself, incapable of letting go of its imperial past. Hence, Erdoğan rejects the idea of bringing Turkey

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<sup>128</sup> Santoro, D. (2019) La Turchia è il solo alleato di Ankara. *Limes* [Online] 15/05

into the orbit of a great power while waiting for his country's glory to return. Since the President's rhetoric lies the determination of the Nation, Erdoğan's Turkey has followed a power-in-the-middle course, where it is politically equidistant from the big powers, and reacts to geopolitical realities by attempting to balance relations with its longtime allies and newfound partners. He conceives of Turkey as an autonomous and pivotal foreign policy actor in a multipolar world, in which multiple centers of authority require a dexterous approach to transnational security coordination, to alliance thinking, and a temporary convergence with actors like Russia or Iran, despite tensions with them in other issue areas.

Hence, although Ankara is still also anchored in NATO, Turkey ultimately stands on its own.

### **Conclusions**

In 2016, Turkey found itself stuck between an alliance unsympathetic to its needs – NATO and, in particular, the US – in Syrian territories east of the Euphrates, and a strong rival – Russia – to the west. This *annus horribilis* dusted off Turkey's Achilles' heel during the transformation process of the Alliance, namely feeling squashed between its traditional allies and its neighbors to the north, east, and south. In consideration of the above, the country has taken great pains to walk a fine line between NATO and Russia.<sup>129</sup>

In Turkish eyes, NATO should take into consideration Russian concerns and sensitivities, that is, NATO's expansion toward Russia and endeavors to heighten its military presence around the Black Sea region. Feeling besieged, Moscow is likely to undertake more nationalist and expansionist policies, in turn causing Turkish–Russian relations to be defined on the basis of hostility and rivalry, as it was during the Cold War. Former Turkish Ambassador Onur Öymen conveyed valuable reasoning more than two decades ago when he remarked, referring to Iran, “*we can choose our friends but we cannot choose our neighbours*” (Cagaptay, 2020: 166). By way of explanation, the irreducible conflicts of interest, and the consequential urgency for cautious policies that underlie relations with Iran and Russia, are consequences of their proximity and power, basic facts that are unlikely to fluctuate any time soon. Being natural rivals, the prospect of a Turkish–Russian imperial confederation is undoubtedly a geopolitical antinomy. It is the historical conjuncture that unites Ankara and Moscow: Turkey's apparent alignment with Russia is a marriage of convenience and is merely meant to work as a Turkish hedging strategy, originating from a transactional logic—i.e. to extract concessions from its Western NATO partners. Driven by short-term imperatives made even more compelling by the

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<sup>129</sup> Oğuzlu, T. (2019) NATO's image in the eyes of Turkey. *Daily Sabah* [Online] Apr 27



gap between resources and ambitions (thus, from their respective weaknesses), the overlapping narratives of the two countries attribute the misery of their respective conditions to U.S. imperialism. However, this is precisely the enabler behind Ankara and Moscow's thrivingness in a tactical limbo in which they strengthen their regional projection by pretending to fight each other. If the American bond were to break, fiction would also fall.<sup>130</sup> To sum up, there is no substantial Turkish pivot toward Russia that could seriously harm Turkey–NATO relations. Turkey is expected to try to balance against Russia than to expand security and defense cooperation with Moscow much further. Such a course of action would only intensify Turkey's dependence on and vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia, and therefore contravene Ankara's goal of greater strategic autonomy.

Some suggest that it would be a timely move to offer the position of Secretary-General of NATO to a Turkish candidate. With current officeholder Stoltenberg's four-year term coming to an end in 2022, having a Turk at the helm of NATO would entail at least three pros.<sup>131</sup> First, NATO would effectively underline its commitment to Turkey as one of its most valued member countries. Second, Ankara would be rewarded for its relentless support of the organization's aims and goals. Third, NATO would become a role model of not just paying lip service to Ankara but becoming ever more fully inclusive. Additionally, NATO needs to devise a clear and bold strategy that approaches Ankara's security concerns about Washington's relationship with the YPG. The United States may also consider implementing the "Manbij Model" in the areas in north-east Syria held by the YPG, or combating the PKK more directly, including by continuing to support Ankara in putting military pressure against the PKK's nerve center in the Qandil Mountains, as well as collaborating with European countries to hinder the PKK's criminal operations and fundraising activities in Europe. Finally, in the big picture, Washington needs to provide Ankara with ironclad guarantees against Russian aggression. To a certain extent, Turkey's struggles in the Middle East resemble those of Japan in East Asia. Even today, Tokyo depends on the U.S. hard power for its security in East Asia, especially against China and North Korea. Following its foray into Syria, Turkey, the Middle East's largest economy but not the primary military power (when considering Russia), needs the United States to shelter it against the challenges posed by the Syrian Civil War. If NATO can use this window of opportunity to its advantage, it will salvage its historic tie with Ankara.

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<sup>130</sup> Santoro, D. (2020b) L'America produce l'intesa tattica tra Turchia e Russia. *Limes* [Online]

<sup>131</sup> Jurgens, K. (2020) Future of NATO-Turkey Relations. *Daily Sabah* [Online] Oct 13

### 3. Turkey's hybrid weapons: migration and maritime boundaries

*“What did we do yesterday? We opened the doors. We will not close those doors...Why? Because the European Union should keep its promises.”*

Erdoğan speaking to the Turkish Parliament on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020<sup>132</sup>

#### Introduction

Chapter 3 examines Turkey's employment of a varied portfolio of unconventional means when seeking to influence others both to take actions (compellence) as well as to refrain from doing so (deterrence). Adopting the theoretical framework of Kelly M. Greenhill's weaponization of migrants as non-military instruments of cross-domain coercion, the author investigates Turkey's coercive use of the migration crisis resulting from the Syrian question and Libyan instability to gain political advantage from the European Union. Then, it addresses Turkey's "Blue Homeland" doctrine, from which stem its assertive positioning as a maritime power and explorations of natural gas reserves. It goes on to examine spiraling tensions in the Mediterranean basin. Alongside military force and intimidation, including recurring violations of the territorial waters and airspaces of neighboring countries, Ankara has also used bilateral deals, such as the November 2019 memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), with the purpose of redefining Turkish rights to the detriment of Cyprus and Greece.

#### 3.1 The weaponization of migrants

The phenomenon of migration has characterized the human species for millennia. However, the mass movement of people across international borders required two developments of relatively recent origin: the establishment of the Nation-State system at the world level and the constant growth of the population. In the 1960s, there was an unprecedented increase in large-scale movements, accentuated with the end of the Cold War.

Global interdependence may provide new coercive means for strategic state and non-state actors to subvert the *status quo* without triggering a war.<sup>133</sup> Today's high interconnectivity

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<sup>132</sup> Al Jazeera (2020c) *Erdogan vows to keep doors open for refugees heading to Europe* [Online] 29 Feb

<sup>133</sup> Lindsay, J. R., Gartzke, E. (2019) *Cross-domain deterrence. Strategy in an Era of Complexity*. Oxford University Press, p. 3

has opened up new pathways for cross-domain operations, including manipulation and exploitation across political, economic, social, virtual, and physical domains.

In 1984, demographer Michael S. Teitelbaum introduced the idea that population flows often do not just occur but are artfully generated.<sup>134</sup> That is, what appears as a spontaneous emigration may be the result of a deliberate migration policy. Population-sending countries thus exercise much greater control over their migrants than is usually accounted for by political analysts, using them as a national resource to be managed in the same way as any other. This category of artificially created flows can be divided into three sub-categories of forced and induced emigrations.<sup>135</sup>

- First, governments may force emigration as a means of attaining cultural homogeneity or asserting the dominance of one ethnic community over another.
- The second type of forced emigration consists of a strategy to expel political dissidents and opponents of the home regime.
- Thirdly, governments may force emigration to achieve a foreign policy objective, such as pressuring, destabilizing neighboring states, or extending their own political and economic interests or those of a dominant ethnic group.

This last case ascribes to Coercive Engineered Migrations (CEMs), “*those real or threatened cross-border population movements that are deliberately created or manipulated, as instruments of deterrence and/or compulsion, to prevent or induce changes in political behavior and/or to extract political, military, and economic concessions from a target state or states.*”<sup>136</sup>

### 3.1.1 Coercive engineered migrations

Exercises in CEM have been attempted more than seventy-five times since the advent of the 1951 Refugee Convention, marking the entry of migrants and refugees into the realm of “high politics”. Smetana and Ludvik (2019) propose that coercive dynamics can be either direct or indirect (“hostage-taking”, “patron-client”, “composite strategies”)<sup>137</sup>. The concept of indirect

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<sup>134</sup> Teitelbaum, M.S (1984) Immigration, Refugees, and Foreign Policy. *International Organization* [Online] Vol. 38, No 3

<sup>135</sup> Weiner, M. (1992-1993) Security, Stability, and International Migration. *International Security* [Online] Vol. 17, No. 3

<sup>136</sup> Greenhill, K. M. (2019) Asymmetric Advantage. Weaponizing People As Nonmilitary Instruments of Cross-Domain Coercion. In: Lindsay, J. R., Gartzke, E. Cross-domain deterrence. Strategy in an Era of Complexity. Oxford University Press, pp. 262-3

<sup>137</sup> Smetana, M., Ludvik, J. (2019) Theorising indirect coercion. The logic of triangular strategies. *International Relations* 33 (3)

coercion covers different ways in which the coercer draws the intermediary actor in the coercive bargaining process to augment his leverage over the target country. The tools to effect CEM have ranged from permission to compulsion, including the offer of positive inducements and provisions of financial incentives through the employment of hostile threats and the use of military force to the opening of normally sealed borders. This peculiar kind of non-kinetic influence has been cross-domain—real or threatened outflows are threatened in the service of achieving objectives in other realms and policy arenas. We are therefore faced with an unconventional strategy, where human beings turn into “demographic bombs” no less effective than those used in modern wars.<sup>138</sup>

In the majority of cases thus far explored, weak states and non-state actors recur to CEM to achieve political goals that would be unattainable through military means. These range from the provision of financial and or military aid to full-blown military operations in support of regime change. Crisis generation serves as an asymmetric instrument of influence, opening up bargaining space with more powerful counterparts where previously there was none. Furthermore, a migration emergency can be “a gift that keeps on giving” and might thus extend to the indefinite future.

Challengers intend to provoke seemingly irreconcilable differences among segments of the target society by applying a kind of legitimate political blackmail based on the exploitation and exacerbation of the so-called “heterogeneity” of political and social interests within polities. They do so in an effort to persuade the target’s leadership to concede to the coercer’s demands rather than incur the anticipated political costs of resistance. The demographic concentrations created during migratory or humanitarian crises generally determine the division of society into at least two antagonistic groups: the pro-refugee/migrant and anti-refugee/migrant camps. The target’s leadership is therefore faced with extremely mobilized and polarized interests, with the impossibility of accepting the requests of one without antagonizing the other. This makes available to coercers a potential wedge through which they can inflict pain that may jeopardize a government’s relationship with its core supporters or even incite general unrest within the target state or states. As Oliver Cromwell Cox (1948) aptly summed it up, the “*true democratic principle*” is that the people “*shall not be made to do what [they do] not like*” (...) *It is only necessary that the dominant group believes in the menace of the cultural tenets and practices of the other group; whether or not they are actually harmful or not is not the crucial*

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<sup>138</sup> Greenhill, K.M. (2010) *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy*. Cornell University Press



*circumstance*".<sup>139</sup> Thus, regardless of whether refugees and migrants represent a real threat, it is the perception that matters.

As a "coercion by punishment strategy", CEM can be carried out operationally through capacity swamping and political agitating. The former focuses on manipulating the target's ability to receive, accommodate, or assimilate a group of migrants or refugees. The latter, instead, builds on maneuvering the target's willingness to do so.

Since in-kind retaliation is rarely an option for targets – many of which are advanced liberal democracies – challengers may accomplish highly credible escalation dominance over their targets. Thus, the chance for success rises if the target states turn out to be susceptible to a series of reputational costs, the so-called hypocrisy costs. Such political-symbolic costs can be imposed if a state acts inconsistently with respect to liberal values and obligations/commitments arising from international norms that it is bound to respect. Would-be coercers, sometimes assisted by the pro-refugee/migrant party, can create a kind of rule-based trap, where humanitarian norms are used as weapons of coercion. Liberal democracies tend to be more vulnerable to hypocrisy costs, as "*fellow liberals benefit from a presumption of amity; non-liberals suffer from a presumption of enmity*".<sup>140</sup>

As journalist and activist Marco Scalvini posited observing the 2011 Libyan crisis, "*The anxiety over a refugee invasion from Africa reveals the contradictions present in Europe today, where, on the one hand, the moral imperative of universal emancipation is proclaimed, but on the other, policies and practice continue the trend of refusing a safe haven to the very refugees they have helped to create*".<sup>141</sup>

Three distinct types of challengers engage in CEM: generators, *agents provocateurs*, and opportunists (Greenhill, 2019: 264). Generators directly instigate or threaten to initiate population outflows unless targets surrender to their demands. Traditionally, most identified generators (like Fidel Castro against the United States between 1965 and 1995) have been relatively weak, undemocratic actors who lack effective recourse to more conventional methods of influence. By contrast, *agents provocateurs* deliberately act in ways designed to incite the generation of cross-border population movements by others. One remarkable example is that of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) insurgents who undertook actions that they

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<sup>139</sup> Cox, O.C. (1948) *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*. New York: Monthly Review Press

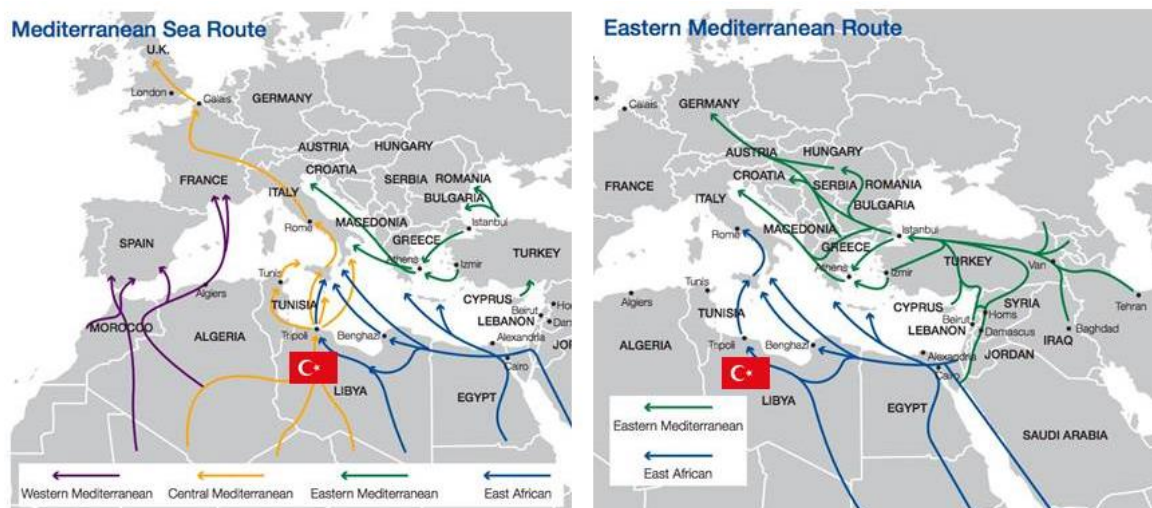
<sup>140</sup> Doyle, M.W. (1986) Liberalism and World Politics. *American Political Science Review* [Online] 80, no. 4

<sup>141</sup> Scalvini, M. (2011) Humanitarian Wars and Rejected Refugees. *Opendemocracy* [Online] April 17

anticipated would cause refugee-generating retaliation by the French military (Greenhill, 2019: 264). Finally, opportunists exploit to their advantage the existence of migration crises created or catalyzed by others. They might threaten to open their borders, engendering humanitarian emergencies, if the targets do not offer them compensatory benefits or take the desired measures. Alternatively, they might offer to mitigate ongoing crises in exchange for military, financial, or political payoffs, as Libya did under Qaddafi’s regime and following his deposition in 2011 (Greenhill, 2019: 265).

### **3.2 Turkey as an opportunist. The wrestling match with the European Union**

Turkey serves as a major transit country for refugees en route to Europe fleeing from civil wars and instability in the MENA and AfPak region. As noted in the previous chapters, Turkey’s relations with the EU have become stiff over the absence of progress in its EU accession negotiations and its exclusion from European security and defense infrastructures, in spite of assurances from the Union. Having followed an open-door policy since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Ankara has emerged as a key player in dealing with the refugee crisis, gaining substantial leverage vis-à-vis the EU in the longer term. The 2016 Turkey–EU deal might be considered as the result of a successful attempt of coercive engineered migration since it has formally endorsed the role of Turkey as Europe’s gatekeeper. Then, in June 2020, the Turkish army deployed troops in Libya at the request of the Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj, providing Turkey with yet another means of pressuring Europe through its control of the migratory route coming from sub-Saharan Africa.



**Fig.7: Mediterranean routes and Turkey’s area of exploitation in Libya**

Source: Hodgson, C. (2017) The world’s most popular migrant routes, in maps. *Business Insider* [Online] Dec 26. Retrieved from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/worlds-most-popular-migrant-routes-in-maps-2017-12?IR=T>

Hence, under the theory of coercive engineered migrations, Turkey provides an excellent illustration of opportunist actors.

### 3.2.1 Direct coercion. The EU–Turkey refugee deal

The European migration crisis represents a prominent case of capacity swamping. This concept helps explain the efficiency of Turkish threats – and the eagerness and nature of the concessions made – in the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016. In fact, capacity swamping is particularly effective if the incipient crisis is sudden and large.<sup>142</sup>

The war in Syria altered the routes of regional human mobility. The adoption of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2013 ratified Turkey's obligations toward all individuals in need of international protection, irrespective of their country of origin, alongside the creation of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) as the agency responsible for migration and asylum.<sup>143</sup> In this context, between 2013 and 2015 Syrians were admitted and settled in accommodation centers in Turkey. In October 2014, the approval of the Regulation on Temporary Protection ensured Syrians access to medical care, education, and work, reinforcing their legal basis of residence in the country. Nonetheless, the worsening of the conflict in Syria and the surge of Syrian refugees under Temporary Protection in Turkey – from 14,000 in 2012 to 2.5 million in 2015 – had a major impact. Internally, it fed the debate on security, particularly in the wake of the failed coup of July 2016, the attacks in Istanbul and Ankara, and the irresolvable tensions with the Kurds. The tightening of migration policies entailed stricter border controls and closures and escalated militarization initiatives like the building up of the 764 km wall along the Syrian border.

In 2015 alone, more than one million refugees and migrants entered the European Union through unregulated channels amid the continent's major refugee crisis since the end of World War II. In that year, the Western Balkans became the central route to Europe as migrants and refugees transited from Turkey to Greece and north to the Western Balkans across the Greece–North Macedonia border.<sup>144</sup> About half of those were fleeing the civil war in Syria, and about one-third of them were seeking political asylum.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Greenhill, K.M (2018) Migration as a Coercive Weapon. New Evidence from the Middle East. In Greenhill, Krause, P. *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics*. Oxford University Press, p. 210

<sup>143</sup> Albanese, D. (2020) EU-Turkey: towards a new deal? In: ISPI, *Navigating the pandemic. The challenge of stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean* [Online] 6th edition, Rome, Mediterranean Dialogues, p. 80

<sup>144</sup> Frontex (2020) *Migratory Routes. Western Balkan Route* [Online]

The question of who should shoulder the monetary, social, and political costs of the new arrivals and how those responsibilities should be shared spawned different, occasionally schizophrenic, policy responses among EU member states. By the end of the year, half a dozen members of the Schengen Zone had unilaterally reestablished internal border controls under the “exceptional circumstances” provision of Article 26 of the Borders Code (Greenhill, 2016: 317). Other states, such as Hungary, set up physical barriers to entry along borders with non-Schengen states. At the same time, frontline states along the EU’s southern border, such as Greece and Italy, have functioned as the main entry points – and by virtue of the Dublin Regulations, holding and processing areas – for the vast majority of new inflows. Brussels’s slowness in assisting frontline states as well as in facilitating promised resettlement of migrants and refugees to other parts of the EU created bottlenecks and turned these states into vast holding camps, which Greek ministers allude to as “*a cemetery of souls*” (Greenhill, 2016: 317). Against this background, migration-related anxieties spurred some within frontline states to overlook Dublin Regulation requirements and permit refugees and migrants to transit through their countries unregistered (and unimpeded) to countries further north, fuelling and speeding up an alternative method of intra-EU burden-sharing. This has in turn heightened fears in non-front line states, too. Donald Tusk, former President of the European Council, warned that, if not brought under control, the migration emergency could spell “doom” for the EU as a political project.<sup>146</sup> In the ensuing months, Britain would vote to leave the EU (the so-called “Brexit”), to a great degree because of grave concerns about unrestricted population movements within and into the European Union. Other member states would also show mounting concerns about the consequence of a seemingly ceaseless flow of displaced people into Europe, and right-wing populist parties would multiply in strength and numbers.

Meanwhile, in light of the June 2015 elections and Russia’s Syrian campaign, the AKP leader decided to seize back the strategic initiative. As a matter of fact, the Russian military operation risked compromising or precluding the safe zone, backed by a “no-fly zone” in Syria, that Erdoğan and Davutoğlu had been trying to create for years. As previously mentioned, this would have served to shelter hundreds of thousands of civilians from airstrikes by government forces in the Idlib region. Above all, Ankara could have drawn out a few thousand mercenaries to dispatch against Damascus and the Kurdish self-governing institutions.

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<sup>145</sup> Greenhill, K.M. (2016) Open Arms Behind Barred Doors: Fear, Hypocrisy and Policy Schizophrenia in the European Migration Crisis. *European Law Journal* [Online] Vol. 22, No.3, May

<sup>146</sup> Euronews (2016) *Tusk gives the EU two months to ‘save Schengen’* [Online] 19/01

The Turkish President then took advantage of the imminence of the refugee crisis as leverage to level the playing field and force the EU to undertake more intensive cooperation with the country, with a view to extracting benefits that thus far had failed to materialize—such as the acquisition of visa liberalization with the EU, the revision of its Customs Union Agreement with the EU, and the re-energization of its accession negotiation talks.

For Turkey, visa liberalization talks are an essential agenda item, launched by the EU in the Visa Liberalization Dialogue with Turkey, in conjunction with the signature of the EU–Turkey Readmission Agreement in 2013. For the European Council, in contrast, visa liberalization constitutes “*a domestically contentious concession that – if granted – would leave the EU without leverage*”.<sup>147</sup> The negotiating directives for a readmission agreement between the Union and Turkey were adopted in 2002, and the negotiations were formally begun in 2005.<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, because of the European Council’s decision to delay the opening of new chapters with Turkey, the consultations came to a halt in 2006, only to be reprised in 2009. The Readmission Agreement became effective in October 2014. However, it dealt only with the return of Turkish nationals, with the third-country national clause predicted to apply from October 2017. The request for visa liberalization with Turkey – begun back in 2012 (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019: 87) – entailed a battle within the EU, between the Justice and Home Affairs Council and Germany and France, which opposed the agreement, on the one hand, and Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG Home) and for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG Near), on the other.

As for the 1995 Customs Union Agreement between the EU and Turkey, it covers all industrial goods but omits agriculture (except for processed agricultural products), services, and public procurement. The European Council adhered to the European Commission’s proposal of extending and deepening the Customs Union in 1996, but negotiations on this were suspended in 2002. In spite of its benefits, the Turkish government lamented imbalances in the system, which was proven to be against the Turkish political and economic interests. The Customs Union membership of Turkey without its full membership into the EU diminished the country’s bargaining chip in its interactions with the EU. Furthermore, provided that the EU and third countries concluded new tariff-free deals, third countries would earn tariff-free access to the Turkish market without Turkey reaping the same benefits in entering their markets. Notably,

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<sup>147</sup> Dimitriadi, A. (2016) Deals without Borders: EU’s Foreign Policy on Migration. *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief* [Online] April 4, p. 6

<sup>148</sup> Dursun-Özkanca, O. (2019) *Turkey-West Relations. The Politics of Intra-alliance Opposition*. Cambridge University Press

the EU is Turkey's top trading partner<sup>149</sup>, representing 41 percent of Turkey's global trade, whereas Turkey is the EU's fourth-largest export market and fifth-largest import provider. In addition, two-thirds of Turkish foreign direct investment (FDI) originates in the EU. Finally, the re-vitalization of its EU accession process is a good illustration of the implementation of a future-oriented strategy.<sup>150</sup>

Confronted with mounting fears, the EU attempted to externalize migration policy to third countries, especially Turkey. The European Council adopted the EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015. The European Commission (2015) declared that the Joint Action Plan is grounded in an understanding and a “spirit of burden sharing” between Turkey and the EU to “*step up their cooperation on support of Syrians under temporary protection and migration management in a coordinated effort to address the crisis created by the situation in Syria*”.<sup>151</sup> Expanding on the Joint Action Plan, Turkey and the EU finalized a deal on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016 – operational since March 20<sup>th</sup> – referred to as the “EU–Turkey Statement”. In force since March 20<sup>th</sup>, it foresaw a pledge on the part of the EU to: speed up the allocation of €3 billion of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, and announce the potential release of an additional €3 billion to Turkey by the end of 2018; execute the “1:1” scheme—the resettlement of one Syrian refugee from Turkey to the EU for every one sent back from Greek islands up to a total of 72,000; implement the Roadmap toward a visa-free regime with Turkey vis-à-vis all participating member states by the end of June 2016<sup>152</sup>; bring momentum to the Turkish accession process; continue the effort for upgrading the Customs Union. In response, Turkey committed to readmit all asylum seekers – who either opt out of the asylum process in Greece or whose asylum application is judged “inadmissible” on the grounds of “first country of asylum” or “safe third country” criteria – and avert the flow of refugees from Turkey to the EU.<sup>153</sup> Finally, the EU and Turkey also agreed to continue intensifying measures against

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<sup>149</sup> European Commission (2019) *Trade: Turkey* [Online]

<sup>150</sup> In a “future-oriented strategy,” actors try “*to augment assets so as to produce better outcomes the next time,*” while bargaining “*is the attempt to produce favorable outcomes with current assets.*” Art, R.J. (2005) Correspondence: Striking the Balance. *International Security* [Online] pp. 183-184

<sup>151</sup> European Commission (2015b) *Press Release: EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan. October 15* [Online]

<sup>152</sup> The Visa Liberalization Dialogue is based on the Roadmap, which enumerates 72 benchmarks in 5 categories: document security, public order and security, migration management, fundamental rights, and readmission of irregular migrants (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019: 87). Since no outstanding visa liberalization benchmarks were met and amendments to the anti-terror law and data protection law are still outstanding, the visa liberalization has still been not implemented as of 2020. Turkey still needs to further align its anti-terror legislation with the EU *acquis* on visa policy. European Commission (2020) *Key findings of the 2020 Report on Turkey* [Online]

<sup>153</sup> European Council (2016) *EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016* [Online]



migrant smugglers and welcomed the establishment of the NATO activity in the Aegean Sea. The reduction in sea arrivals since the day of the signature is unquestionably the most essential consequence of the agreement: influx dropped from 856,000 in 2015 to 29,000 in 2017. Nevertheless, the resettlement scheme was never properly enforced and only 27,000 Syrians (as of May 2020) have been resettled so far (Albanese, 2020: 82). Moreover, Erdoğan has long complained that the EU has not kept its side of the bargain, even though the Union has already disbursed €3.7 billion (Albanese, 2020: 82) and the rest is, according to EU officials, already “contracted out” to be paid by 2022.<sup>154</sup> Turkey has also lamented Europe’s regulatory framework, which only allows for payments to specific institutions and projects (as opposed to direct payment to the Turkish government).<sup>155</sup> Domestic political considerations have combined with financial ones. At a time of economic downturn, many Turks regard Syrians as the source of their predicament, assuming a refugees-out narrative. This may explain why the government is overstating the number of refugees who have left Turkey – to as much as 140,000 – whereas EU officials identify crossings of the Aegean as being “in the thousands”. Facing jittery markets and real budgetary difficulties, Ankara hopes that a new financial agreement with the EU will advance a brighter picture of the economy and reverse the decline in support for Erdoğan’s AKP.

The fruitful conclusion of the deal came soon after a series of threats made by Turkish officials, including Erdoğan’s blunt statement during a speech in Ankara in mid-February that *“We do not have the word “idiot” written on our foreheads. We will be patient but we will do what we have to. Don’t think that the planes and the buses are there for nothing”*. This followed his admission in the same speech that he had also intimidated European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker at a G20 meeting the previous November that Turkey could send refugees to Europe, [specifying that it could easily] *“open the doors to Greece and Bulgaria anytime and put the refugees on buses”*. Erdoğan reportedly further bragged, *“I am proud of what I said. We have defended the rights of Turkey and the refugees. And we told them [the Europeans]: “Sorry, we will open the doors and say goodbye to the migrant”*.<sup>156</sup> Lest any EU official(s) envision backing out of or down from any part of the deal, a month after its formal conclusion, then Turkish Prime Minister Davutoğlu remarked Turkey’s resolve to carry

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<sup>154</sup> Aydıntaşbaş, A. (2020) Erdoğan’s refugee gambit. *European Council on Foreign Relations* [Online] 6 March

<sup>155</sup> Pierini, M. (2019) Can Turkey’s Prickly Relationship With the EU Be Repaired? *Carnegie Europe* [Online] November 07

<sup>156</sup> The Guardian (2016) *Turkish president threatens to send millions of refugees to the EU* [Online] 12 Feb

out its threats by proclaiming at a news conference that “*The deal we struck with the EU is very clear. We want this human tragedy to end, our citizens to travel visa free, and the customs union to be updated. [But] if the EU doesn’t keep its word, including the migrants deal we will cancel all agreements*”.<sup>157</sup>

In accordance with the CEM theory, EU member states and leaders found themselves trapped politically between the hammer and the anvil, as hoped by the Turks. The German situation in this regard is revealing. In the midst of the crisis, German Chancellor Angela Merkel heralded an open-door policy, allowing up to one million refugees into Germany in 2015. Her motto was “*Wir Schaffen das*”, along the lines of U.S. President Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign phrase “*Yes, we can*”. Having absorbed the largest number of refugees in absolute terms (Greenhill, 2016: 319), in 2016 German public opinion was still split but growing increasingly hostile toward migration, which became the key political issue of the elections for regional parliaments in three states. Voters punished Merkel’s Christian Democratic Party in all three states – losing control in two of the three – whereas the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany Party succeeded in gaining seats. The effectiveness of Turkey’s compellent power is made evident as the EU showed its willingness to ignore the serious violations of human rights in Turkey and rising authoritarianism in exchange for stemming the refugee flow to Europe.<sup>158</sup> Thus, in addition to economic and political concessions, Turkey obtained an international reputational boost—akin, if some critics are correct, to a “*get out of jail free*” card (Greenhill, 2016: 328).

In the following years, Turkey continued to resort to threats to “open the gates” unless more international aid was provided, particularly at times of tension with European countries. As a response to European criticism of the Turkish offensive in northern Syria in October 2019, Erdoğan denounced: “*Hey EU, wake up! I say it again; if you try to frame our operation there as an invasion, our task is simple: we will open the doors and send 3.6 million migrants to you.*”<sup>159</sup> At the end of February 2020, in reaction to the killing of 33 Turkish troops in the Idlib province, the Turkish President announced that he had begun to license refugees to stream into Greece, as a way to get the EU to pressure Syria and its Russian backer to halt the offensive (Al Jazeera, 2020b). It immediately pushed an estimated 25,000 migrants to the Turkish–Greek border, where they were met with an inflexible Greek response and rising evidence of

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<sup>157</sup> France24 (2016) *Turkey threatens to back out of EU migrant deals over visas* [Online] 19/04.

<sup>158</sup> Pierini, M. (2016a) *The Looming EU-Turkey Visa Drama*. *Carnegie Europe* [Online]

<sup>159</sup> Wheeldon, T. (2019) *Europe ‘lacks leverage’ over Turkey amid Erdogan migrant threat*. *France24* [Online] 10/10



pushbacks coupled with the suspension of temporary asylum applications (Albanese, 2020: 82). In front of the closed, militarized western border, Rima – a 45-year-old Syrian former nurse who reported the atrocities of the regime in a field hospital in Dara – recounted: “*I understood we were being used*”.<sup>160</sup> In the aftermath of the events, a meeting between Erdoğan, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and President of the European Council Charles Michel marked the beginning of the renegotiation of the EU–Turkish Agreement, where leaders restated their commitment and pledged to update its terms considering the stock-taking arranged for March 2021. On the Turkish side, all migrants have been evacuated from the border area whereas in Greece the situation has been aggravating even further, particularly on the islands where almost 40,000 asylum-seekers are abandoned even though capacity remains at around 6,000 (Albanese, 2020: 82). Eleven European countries willingly initiated the prompt resettlement of unaccompanied minors (vowing to accept 1,600), while the Greek authorities proclaimed the extension to 40 km of the 12.5 km barbed-wire fence erected in 2012 on the land border with Turkey. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, the EU adopted a package of €485 million for support to refugees in Turkey by continuing two EU flagship humanitarian projects (European Commission, 2015a).

In conclusion, the controversial deal epitomizes Erdoğan’s sharp employment of compelling threats and “blackmail power”<sup>161</sup> to enlarge Turkish room of maneuver by endowing it with a hybrid status: not quite an insider, nor an outsider on the European political scene. In fact, the Turkish President exposed how the very survival of the Schengen area depends on his own willingness to cooperate with a European Union increasingly distinguished by a fear psychosis of migration.

### 3.2.2. Indirect coercion. Libya

Over the last year, Turkish foreign projection has spread considerably even far from its closest neighborhood, Libya being the most significant case. Within the broader framework of geopolitical and geoeconomic conflicts unravelling in the region, the outcome of the Libyan conflict will undoubtedly have an impact on the influence of the contending parties in the Mediterranean.

Today the country is split into two administrative areas, with rival factions competing for political legitimacy and 392,241 people internally displaced because of the enduring armed

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<sup>160</sup> Fallon, K., Boersma, A. (2020) “There is no future”: the refugees who became pawns in Erdoğan’s game. *The Guardian* [Online] 8 May

<sup>161</sup> Meerts, P. (2015) *Diplomatic Negotiation: Essence and Evolution*. Clingendael, p. 29

conflict.<sup>162</sup> Oil production has been repeatedly curbed by clashes between the militias prospering in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. The liquidity crisis of the Libyan banking system impedes Libyans from accessing their own money. Water, fuel, cash, and every other commodity on the Libyan market have fallen under the control of criminal organizations, alongside migrants. Further, pre-existing criminal networks like the Nigerian and Sudanese soon infiltrated the flourishing illegal business. This transnational criminal enterprise has brought about a sort of industrialization of human smuggling that has resulted in peak numbers throughout the Libyan conflict.

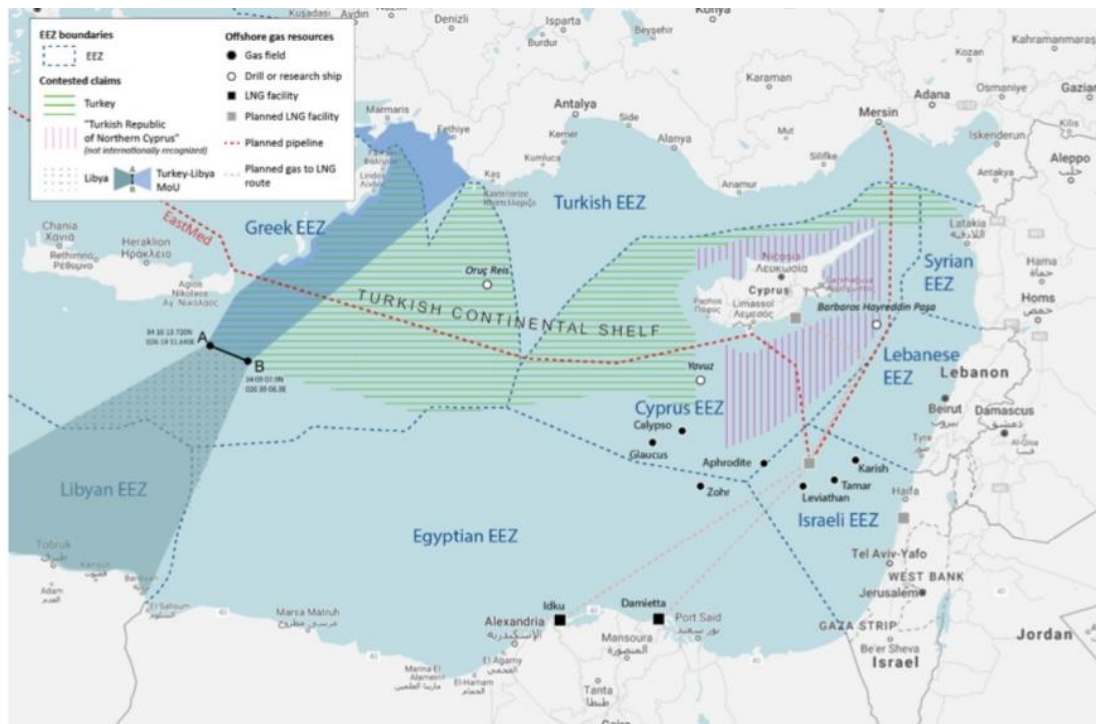
The agreement on the delimitation of the respective areas of maritime jurisdiction signed in November 2019 with al-Sarraj's internationally recognized GNA enables Turkey to extend its clout to North Africa, hence augmenting its power projection in the Mediterranean basin.<sup>163</sup> The maritime deal partitioning their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) boundaries while cutting into what Greece argues is the Greek EEZ was a response toward Turkey's exclusion from energy transit deals and exploitation in the Eastern Mediterranean by Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel. The agreement endows Turkey with the possibility of operating military bases from Libya and establishes maritime borders in its favor both in security and economic terms that would give Ankara access to massive energy exploitation opportunities. So, with a resolve to gain a considerable share in the reconstruction of a hydrocarbon-rich country, Turkey might earn lucrative energy deals in the aftermath of the Libyan civil war.<sup>164</sup> Notably, all political parties support the agreement, and elements in the Turkish Navy have been proponents of a similar accord for more than ten years (Risk Intelligence, 2020: 5).

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<sup>162</sup> Porsia, N. (2020) Irregular migration and Libya: is the crisis over? In: ISPI, *Navigating the pandemic. The challenge of stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean* [Online] 6th edition, Rome, Mediterranean Dialogues, p. 76

<sup>163</sup> Talbot, V. (2020a) Turkey's Assertiveness on the Regional Stage. In: ISPI, *Navigating the pandemic. The challenge of stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean* [Online] 6th edition, Rome, Mediterranean Dialogues, p. 32

<sup>164</sup> Risk Intelligence (2020) *Turkey's 'great game' in Libya: conflict scenarios and maritime implications* [Online] Whitepaper/May



**Fig.8: Delimitation of EEZs in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Turkey–Libya MoU**

Source: Stanicek, B. (2020) Turkey: Remodelling the eastern Mediterranean [Online] *European Parliament Research Service*, September, p.5 [06/01/2021] Retrieved from:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652048/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)652048\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652048/EPRS_BRI(2020)652048_EN.pdf)

Turkey’s entanglement in the Libyan quagmire has brought about a strategic reversal on the ground in favor of the GNA in its confrontation with the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar, who launched an offensive to seize Tripoli in April 2019. Due to the mercenaries and military equipment provided by Russia, Haftar's troops – controlling most of Libya – were not far from taking the city. It was at that moment that Turkey decided to throw its weight in on the scale by backing the official government camp. On January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, the Turkish parliament approved a one-year armed intervention in Libya. As in Idlib, Turkish drones caused real damage and forced the LNA to withdraw in areas stretching west from Tripoli to the Tunisian border, procuring a coastal highway link to Tunisia as well as a buffer zone in the southern areas surrounding Tripoli. It has thus become less likely for Haftar’s forces to overthrow the GNA due to the Turkish intervention.

By supplying weapons, equipment, armed drones, (Syrian) mercenaries, and military training as part of the military cooperation with the GNA and in violation of the UN arms embargo on Libya<sup>165</sup>, Ankara has successfully carved out for itself one of the most prominent roles in the

<sup>165</sup> United Nations (2019) *Security Council Renews Measures to Implement Arms Embargo against Libya for Another Year, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2473 (2019)* [Online] 10 June

Libyan crisis. By virtue of its strong foothold in North Africa, Turkey is undercutting the more consolidated positions of other players, such as Italy, France, Greece, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>166</sup> In response to the change in the front lines among the Libyan warring camps, Egypt seems adamant to put a stop to Turkey's extending grip into Libya's oil crescent, also by force if necessary. Alluding to a potential more conspicuous military role for his country in Libya, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi declared on June 20<sup>th</sup> that any direct Egyptian interference “*would have international legitimacy at this point,*” underlining that the key central towns of Sirte and al-Jufrah represent red lines for Egypt's national security.<sup>167</sup> Tsukerman (2020) suggests precisely that Turkey's provocative regional agenda may be part of a complex strategy to surround Egypt with hostile forces on multiple fronts and undermine its regional role.<sup>168</sup>

As in Syria, Turkish presence in Libya – a game-changer in the conflict – seems bound to grow stronger and endure. In this respect, Ankara is bargaining with the GNA to utilize two strategic outposts to monopolize the western part of the country: the Misrata naval base and the al-Watiya airbase, recently re-captured<sup>169</sup>. Moreover, the trilateral protocol that Tripoli, Ankara, and Doha signed last summer provides Turkey with a role in Libya's institution-building through the creation of a tripartite coordination center for cooperation and military training, intending to form a new regular army.<sup>170</sup> Therefore, Turkish involvement in Libya increases the likelihood of continued fighting along the frontlines in Western Tripolitania, leading to a “Syrianization” of the Libyan crisis. Here, the reflections of the intra-Sunni clash (with Turkey and Qatar in support of the Western factions and Egypt and the United Arab Emirates alongside the East<sup>171</sup>) outline one of the most classic examples of proxy war of our day. On February 20<sup>th</sup>, Erdoğan confirmed for the first time that pro-Turkish Syrian fighters were present in Libya

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<sup>166</sup> Duran, B. (2020b) What are Turkey's power and intent? *SETA* [Online] 22 June

<sup>167</sup> Shama, N. (2020) Geography and Resources: Maritime Borders in the Mediterranean. In: Dentice, G., Talbot, V. (2020) *A Geopolitical Sea: The New Scramble for the Mediterranean* [Online] ISPI Dossier, July 17, p.14

<sup>168</sup> Tsukerman, I. (2020) From Tripoli to Tripoli, Turkey's Real Aim is Egypt. *BESA* [Online] September 8

<sup>169</sup> Daily Sabah (2020) *Turkey in talks with Libyan govt to use Misrata, al-Watiya military bases* [Online] Jun 15

<sup>170</sup> Soyulu, R. (2020) In Libya, Turkey and Qatar deepen their footprint amid deadlock in negotiations. *Middle East Eye* [Online] 20 August

<sup>171</sup> France and Russia also back Gen. Haftar. Notably, Russia has increasingly relied on Private Military Companies (PMCs) – such as the Wagner Group – to serve as its proxies in Africa. Cragin, R.K., MacKenzie, L. (2020) Russia's Escalating Use of Private Military Companies in Africa. *Institute for National Strategic Studies* [Online] Nov. 24

alongside Ankara's training personnel.<sup>172</sup> There are also reports from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) that Turkey has sent 2,500 members of the Daesh branch in Tunisia to Libya in recent months.<sup>173</sup>

Turkish stakes in Libya include resuming the multi-billion dollar projects that its construction firms had in place in Libya before the fall of Qaddafi's regime. The first step in this direction was taken in mid-August with the signature of economic and trade understandings aimed at solving the issue of pending projects between the two countries, while also paving the way for new Turkish investments in Libya.<sup>174</sup>

Libya represents one of the natural gates of Africa into Europe. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, a "mini-surge" in irregular arrivals along the Central Mediterranean route was observed in 2020. By mid-November, Italy recorded more than 30,000 migrant arrivals at its shores, a number that is almost three times higher than that of the previous year.<sup>175</sup> But the figure is around 80% lower than 170,000 ca., that is, the number of people who reached Italy by sea each year on average between 2014 and 2016 (Villa, 2020: 72). In fact, high irregular arrivals to Italy declined from mid-July 2017, due to the two-pronged action by the EU and Italy to deter clandestine migration from other African countries toward Libya, and from Libya toward Italy and Malta.<sup>176</sup> Two factors explain the mini-surge in sea-crossings in 2020. First, the situation of refugees in Libya had already deteriorated well before the pandemic. Second, social and economic developments in Tunisia amount to the main driver of this summer's rise in irregular arrivals. In July and August, the influx from Tunisia made up around two-thirds of total arrivals to Italy. This is a stark reversal if compared with the period of high sea arrivals to Italy (2014-2016) when around 90% of those who arrived at Italian shores had departed from Libya, while Tunisia accounted for just 5% of the total. Foreign Minister of Libya's eastern

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<sup>172</sup> Al Arabiya (2020) *Erdogan confirms presence of pro-Turkish Syrian fighters in Libya* [Online] 21 February

<sup>173</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2020) *Turkey to send 2,500 members of the Tunisian branch*

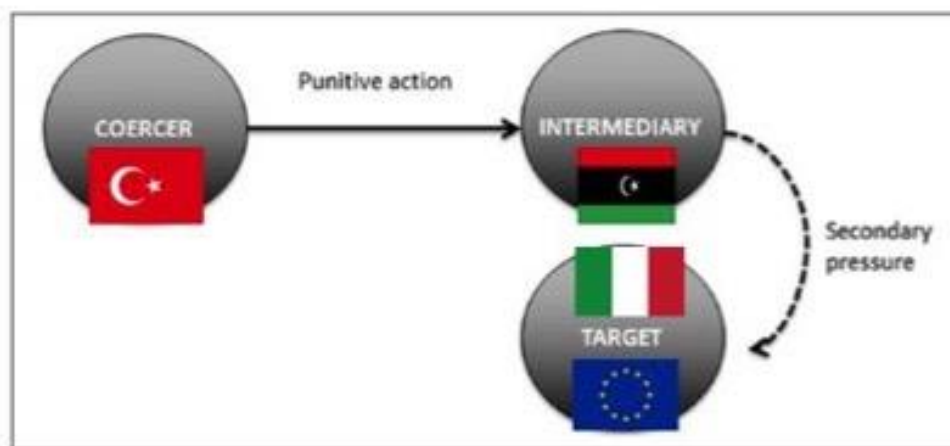
<sup>174</sup> Middle East Monitor (2020) *Turkey, Libya sign economic, trade understandings* [Online] August 14

<sup>175</sup> Villa, M. (2020) Migration trends in the Mediterranean and the COVID-19 pandemic. In: ISPI, *Navigating the pandemic. The challenge of stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean* [Online] 6th edition, Rome, Mediterranean Dialogues, p. 72

<sup>176</sup> The adoption in 2015 of the European Agenda on Migration was combined with the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF Africa) and the endeavor to make EU cooperation and aid increasingly conditional on the African origin and transit countries' compliance with international migration governance policies. In addition, cooperation between Italy and Libyan authorities – which involved empowering the Libyan Coast Guard and avoiding to denounce smugglers that were detaining migrants for longer periods rather than sending them at sea – produced the largest change in irregular sea arrivals to Italy. See Villa, 2020: 73.

government Abdulhadi Lahweej warned that Turkish interference would lead to refugees fleeing to the south of Europe, including mercenaries. “*They will be a ticking time bomb for Europe*”, he affirmed. A Turkish control on the coasts of western Libya would bring Europe into a dangerous grip as Ankara could replicate in the North African country what has already been done on the eastern route that is, to threaten an exodus of migrants, thus pressing Europe both from the south and from the east.<sup>177</sup> This might be conducive to a new peak of arrivals to Italy and precipitate Europe and Italy into a new crisis.

In sum, consistent with Smetana and Ludvik’s conceptualization of indirect coercion, Turkey employs a “patron–client” strategy to attain leverage over the target. Accordingly, the coercer menaces to take direct punitive actions against the intermediary. The challenger expects that the intermediary possesses some considerable leverage over the target to exert secondary pressure over the target and moderate the latter’s behavior to avoid punitive actions against itself.



**Fig.9: Turkey–Libya patron–client strategies**

Source: Smetana, M., Ludvik, J. (2019) Theorising indirect coercion. The logic of triangular strategies. *International Relations* 33 (3) [06/01/2021]

In fact, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias described the Libyan–Turkish memorandum defining common boundaries as the outcome of Turkish blackmail to the beset Libyan government.<sup>178</sup> Turkey allegedly blackmailed Libya into conceding rights to extract oil and natural gas in the country, confiding in support or silence from the EU, NATO, and the United Nations amid threats to force hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees to travel over the EU

<sup>177</sup> Institut Montaigne (2020) *The Libyan Crisis: a Russia-Turkey-France Triangle* [Online] 30 June

<sup>178</sup> Ekathimerini (2019) *Dendias: Turkey blackmailed Libya* [Online] 08.12

border into Greece. The signature of the security deal occurred in parallel with, and was conditional on, the MoU redrawing the two countries' maritime borders. According to one official in Tripoli-based Prime Minister al-Sarraj's office, "It was like a give-and-take game" as "They took advantage of our weakness at the time".<sup>179</sup>

### **3.3 Rediscovering the sea. The "Blue Homeland" doctrine**

Turkey is well aware that its maritime boundaries, stretching over three seas, are weak and, at the same time, constitute an opportunity for its energy needs, economic independence, and expansion. Turkish foreign policy involves an important maritime component, summed up by the "Blue Homeland" (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine, for control and consolidation of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean, and the Black Sea through military power projection. Cem Gürdeniz, a retired Turkish rear admiral among the architects of the "Blue Homeland," introduced the concept in 2006 as a reaction to an existential threat, and proposes it as guaranteeing the faculty to "sleep comfortably at home."<sup>180</sup>In his vision, the sea will be of vital importance in the short-run. The "Blue Homeland" is based on two complementary pillars aimed at defending and protecting Turkish maritime rights and interests. The first points out the maritime areas under the country's national sovereignty. According to Gürdeniz, it is crucial to emphasize Turkish declared and undeclared areas of sovereign maritime jurisdiction, because the maritime domain is the aquatic dimension of Turkish national territory.<sup>181</sup> The second pillar aims to arouse a *Weltanschauung* – a vision of the world –rather than a maritime doctrine for the Turkish state and people. Moreover, *Mavi Vatan* is a school of leadership and geopolitical guidance for any government, endowed with a supra-political character. The admiral contests some European and American scholars' association of his doctrine with certain political orientations, such as neo-Ottomanism or Turkish imperialism. Gürdeniz specifies that the "Blue Homeland" will be pursued until Turkey has achieved its goals. Eventually, it will bring about the creation of a maritime state with a sea-loving population.<sup>182</sup>

So, while the "Blue Homeland" stems most immediately from maximalist Turkish claims in areas where Greece and Cyprus assert jurisdiction, Gürdeniz ultimately argues that it is also

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<sup>179</sup> Magdy, S. (2020) Joining the conflict in Libya, Turkey sees economic gains. *AP NEWS* [Online] July 30

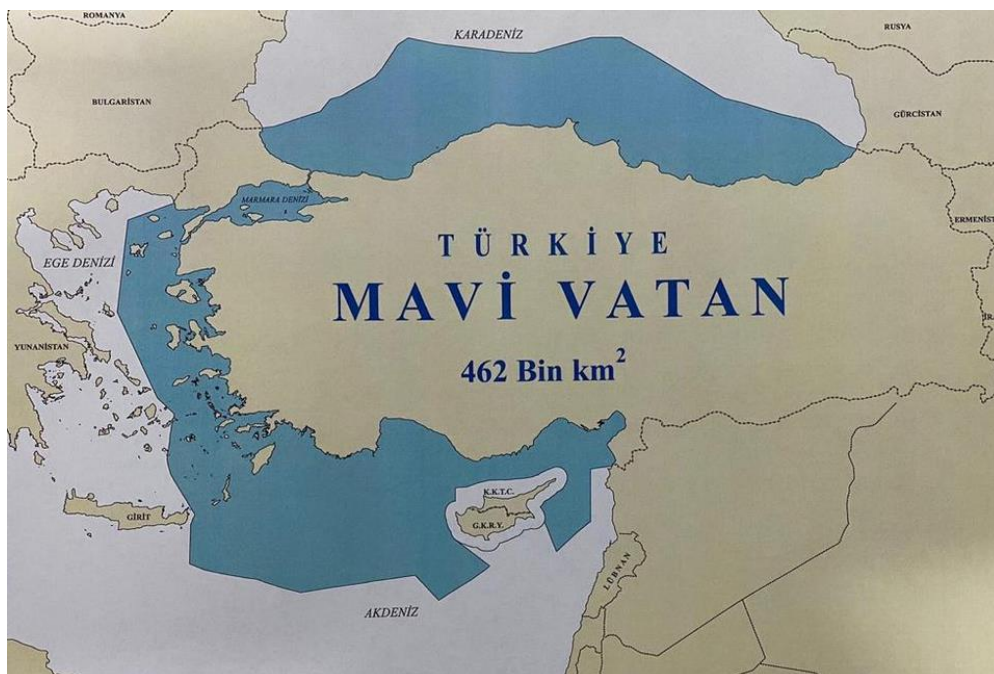
<sup>180</sup> Erdemir, A., Kowalski, P. (2020) 'Blue Homeland' and the irredentist future of Turkish foreign policy. *War on the Rocks* [Online] September 30

<sup>181</sup> Youtube (2020) *Mappa Mundi: L'offensiva turca nel Mediterraneo. Ankara a Tripoli. E l'Italia?* [Online]

<sup>182</sup> Ansaldo, M. (2020) 'La Patria blu nel mondo post-occidentale'. *Limes* [Online] 3/08



crucial for Turkish political and economic influence across the region. Since he believes that “the Mediterranean is not sufficient for an expanding Turkey,” he incites Ankara to assert control of the “Persian Gulf, Sea of Oman, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, the Eastern waters of the Atlantic Ocean, [and] North Africa” (Ansaldo, 2020). The Turkish navy operates regularly across the Mediterranean Sea, in the Black Sea (especially in front of Bulgaria), and in the Aegean Sea, in the proximity of the eastern chain of Greek islands. The recently opened Turkish base in Qatar, inaugurated in April 2016, has supplied Ankara and Doha with muscle in the Persian Gulf, as well as the northern reaches of the Indian Ocean, spanning from the Gulf toward East Africa. Symbolically, the base will mark the Turkish navy’s return to the Indian Ocean and East Africa since the 1550s, when the Ottomans battled the Portuguese kings for dominance there (Cagaptay, 2020: 241). The base reportedly includes army, navy, air force, and Special Forces components, as well as trainers for the Qatari military. It will also provide the Turkish military with the desert-training medium it currently lacks, and enable Turkish naval forces to conduct counter-piracy and other operations in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, and East Africa. It is also likely to function as a hub for future transoceanic Turkish operations. In this regard, Turkish cooperation with Pakistan is based upon a strategic perspective according to which Ankara will be able to develop a permanent presence in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Gulf (Pinko, 2020).



**Fig.10: Turkey’s Mavi Vatan**

Source: Gjevori, E. (2020) Turkey’s ‘Blue Homeland’: striking a balance in the Eastern Mediterranean. *TRT World* [Online] 7 Aug.



Retrieved from: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/turkey-s-blue-homeland-striking-a-balance-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-37356> [06/01/2021]

The most prolific former flag officer in Turkish media today, Gürdeniz also identifies the Ottoman failure to rule the seas as the cause of the empire's demise. Turkey, he maintains, is traditionally deficient in an appreciation of its maritime traditions and accomplishments. Naval supremacy is essential for the survival of the Turkish Republic, which in his opinion persists in the crosshairs of Western imperialism (Erdemir, Kowalski, 2020). Gürdeniz's multiple writings and television appearances hint at the ascendancy of a more antagonistic and aggressive strain of thought within Turkish security circles. In the words of one officer in October 2019, "*I submit that we are ready to protect every swath of our 462 thousand square meter blue homeland with great determination and undertake every possible duty that may come.*"<sup>183</sup>

Within the Eurasianist paradigm<sup>184</sup>, the "Blue Homeland" is part of a broader strategy of challenging the West and establishing Turkish supremacy in the region. Gürdeniz argues that Washington wishes to subvert Turkish sovereignty in coalition with other regional powers. Central to this emerging alliance is Greece, a country he charges with a long history of allying itself with Western imperial powers due to its lack of military strength. Therefore, Gürdeniz has urged Ankara to take a firm stand toward Greek counterclaims in the Aegean and Mediterranean. In his view, waters bordering Greece's islands do not grant Athens the right to draw on the region's natural gas deposits. Additionally, while not patently contesting Ankara's NATO membership, the retired admiral has stated that the Alliance is a manifestation of what he still euphemistically refers to as the "Atlantic front." Turkey's political destiny, the architect of the doctrine rebuts, lies broadly with the states of Eurasia (most notably Russia). His political opinions place him solidly among the followers of Doğu Perinçek and the Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*), defined by its categorical opposition to the United States. He sustains that building deeper ties with Russia and China would not only help further Turkish interests but also serve as a bulwark against what he has termed the "imperialist powers" of the West

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<sup>183</sup> Gingeras, R. (2020) Blue Homeland: the heated politics behind Turkey's new maritime strategy. *War on the Rocks* [Online] June 2

<sup>184</sup> During the early 2000s, Eurasianism (*Avrasyacılık*) became more and more popular in the Turkish political discourse. Nonetheless, no consensus on the conceptualization of Eurasianism has emerged among intellectuals and political activists in Turkey. At the discursive level, Turkish Eurasianism has been informed mainly by a *strategic discourse of Eurasianism*. In this perspective, the geopolitical interests of Eurasian players are constructed into a rationalized set of tactical and strategic actions for the purpose of bolstering a regional integration process or embracing a common position on Eurasia's internal and external challenges. At the practical level, Turkey's politics of Eurasianism tends to be guided by a *pragmatic discourse of Eurasianism*. Accordingly, interests, identities, and agendas of Eurasian political actors are formulated into pragmatic sets of actions directed at achieving broader political objectives. Importantly, these may or may not prioritize the realization of a regional integration process in Eurasia, or the adoption of a common regional position on Eurasia's internal or external challenges. See Tannrisever, 2018: 18.

(Gingeras, 2020). For President Erdoğan, the doctrine also serves as a platform to broaden Islamist influence. More specifically, he hopes that Turkish dominance of the Eastern Mediterranean will foster its military and proxy presence in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and beyond, and thereby reinforce the footprint of the Muslim Brotherhood and its agenda.

The pillars of this new maritime strategy are a more active role for the Turkish navy in the energy power struggle in the waters around Turkey and the national defense system as well as the development of an indigenous defense industry.<sup>185</sup> The ambitious MILGEM naval force build-up program is based on the understanding that the key to Turkey's force build-up and its authority as a regional and international power is the independent and technological development of the local defense industry. As documented, in the last decade Turkish military spending has increased by 86%, to reach 20.4 billion in 2019, and focuses on the production and development of vessels, aircraft, and advanced weapon systems, particularly for the navy (Talbot, 2020a: 30). Turkey aspires to become a world-leading arms exporter, which will enable it to influence countries and policies, as occurs in the American, Russian, and Chinese models.

*Mavi Vatan* is most often used as a shorthand expression for Ankara's maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. Salient in this regard is the presence of large deposits of natural gas off the coast of the island of Cyprus, as explained in the following paragraph. Energy constitutes the growth driver for Turkish economy. The country's economic and demographic growth – growth prognosis equals 90 million citizens in 2030 (Cagaptay, 2019: 70) – has led to a rise in its energy needs. More than 90% of these is imported by external suppliers, namely Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Libya. It should not be forgotten that Turkey remains exposed to economic and financial risks. The Turkish economy currently recounts the largest account deficit among OECD countries, amounting to somewhere between 5 and 7 percent of its GDP (Cagaptay, 2019: 278). An energy-poor nation with an annual energy import bill of about \$30 billion, Turkey requires enormous amounts of foreign investment, or annual cash flows to keep growing at a rate of over 4 percent every year. The urge for the diversification of sources became even more pressing after Turkey shot down the Russian fighter jet in November 2015. Especially in the last months, Turkey has magnified its liquid natural gas (LNG) spot imports, especially from the United States.

Therefore, Turkey's pursuit of energetic independence depends on its ability to operate and control the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, and

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<sup>185</sup> Pinko, E. (2020) Turkey's Maritime Strategy Ambitions: The Blue Homeland Doctrine (Navi Matan) *International Institute for Migration and Security Research* [Online] 31/03

the Persian Gulf. In this regard, on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020, Erdoğan shared the news that Turkey had discovered natural gas in the Black Sea, specifically in the Tuna-1 region.<sup>186</sup> The reserve is 320 billion cubic meters (bcm) and is forecast to cover at least 7-8 years of Turkey's natural gas demand, bringing the country closer to its objective of becoming a natural gas hub. The discovered amount also gives Turkey the necessary leverage not only for future agreements but also for a possible revision of existing contracts.

To sum up, much evidence indicates that Gürdeniz's views have had a profound impact, the most obvious sign being the now-pervasive adoption of the phrase "*Mavi Vatan*". The largest naval exercise in Turkish history – which took place in March 2019 – bears the operational name "Blue Homeland 2019." The official journal sponsored by Turkey's Naval War College is also named "*Mavi Vatan*". As an irredentist concept that claims vast sections of the Mediterranean and Aegean seas, including Greek and Cypriot maritime borders and hydrocarbon deposits, the increasing preeminence of Turkey's "Blue Homeland" doctrine suggests greater amounts of tension within the Eastern Mediterranean lie ahead.

### **3.4 Challenging the Eastern Mediterranean Order**

*Mavi Vatan* relies on the employment of several tools across a broad spectrum, from gunboat diplomacy to drilling activities, legal initiatives, and multilateral interstate relations. The discovery in the last decade of enormous hydrocarbon riches in the region and the escalation of the civil conflict in Libya transformed the Eastern Mediterranean into a new regional hotspot, rejuvenating interests in drawing maritime borders between the littoral states. As estimated by Wood Mackenzie, roughly 125 trillion cubic feet (tcf) offshore natural gas reserves were found in the territorial waters of several eastern Mediterranean countries (Stanicek, 2020: 2). However, the region contains only about 1% of proven global reserves.<sup>187</sup> Although gas in the Eastern Mediterranean constitutes a potential source of revenue and can alleviate import dependencies, tensions in the basin over rights to natural resources have as much to do with politics as with economics. To that end, Mediterranean players have pursued different paths. Turkey has unfolded its hard power capabilities in Libya's proxy civil war; Egypt strives to become a natural gas hub in the Eastern Mediterranean; and Greece, Cyprus, and Israel are working out to build a 1,900-kilometer subsea pipeline to transfer Israeli and Cypriot gas to

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<sup>186</sup> Özdemir, G.S. (2020) A new era for Turkey. Natural gas discovery in the Black Sea. *SETA* [Online] Number 61, August

<sup>187</sup> Tertrais, B. (2020) Whose Sea? Untangling the Eastern Mediterranean Great Game. *Institut Montaigne* [Online] 8 October

Europe through Greece (the project has been put on hold because of the coronavirus pandemic and falling oil prices). Meanwhile, European states seek to see their current dependence on Russian natural gas diminished and the USA is keeping a close eye on the regional evolution. Exploiting the region's energy resources also constitutes an opportunity for some countries, such as Israel, to forge closer ties with the EU; Israel is even speaking of its "new neighborhood" centered on its alliance with Greece and Cyprus (Stanicek, 2020: 2).

The crux lies in the status and applicability of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the region. It outlines territorial waters as up to 12 nautical miles (NM) and stipulates that States possess "*sovereign rights and jurisdiction*" in an EEZ of 200 NM, as well as on an extended continental shelf of up to 350 nautical miles under certain conditions.<sup>188</sup> Yet, the narrow geography of the Eastern Mediterranean complicates the implementation of such principles. When the maritime distance between two countries does not exceed 424 NM, UNCLOS invites parties to find "equitable" solutions in determining a consensual dividing line between their EEZs. It considers islands as any other part of national territories as long as they can "*sustain human habitation or economic life of their own*". Further entangling the situation is the fact that many countries of the region have not signed (Israel, Syria, Turkey) nor ratified (Lebanon) UNCLOS.

Seeking to develop into an energy hub between hydrocarbon-rich areas and the European markets as well as to diversify its energy supplies, Ankara seemed prepared to unhesitatingly challenge any initiative that may fail to consider Turkey or endanger its geostrategic interests. This was the case with the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), established in 2018 by Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, Italy, Israel, and the Palestinian National Authority. A year later, it turned into a multinational body tasked with coordinating the energy policies of its member states and creating a regional gas market.

The first move was taken in May 2019 when Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu proclaimed the start of drilling activities in the waters west of Cyprus, having not made any successful discovery in national waters.<sup>189</sup> The discovery of gas fields off the coast of Cyprus inflamed the tensions between Turkey and the Republic of Cyprus that had been present since the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the division of the island. Claiming the rights of the

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<sup>188</sup> United Nations (1982) *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* [Online] 10 December

<sup>189</sup> Talbot, V. (2020) Turkey's Struggle for Influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. In: Dentice, G., Talbot, V. (2020) *A Geopolitical Sea: The New Scramble for the Mediterranean* [Online] ISPI Dossier, July 17

Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) to have its EEZ, over the years Ankara has obstructed unilateral initiatives by the Republic of Cyprus as well as the activities of international energy companies in contended waters around the island. Indeed, Turkey regards Cyprus's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) as infringing on its continental shelf – Turkey claims a 200-mile EEZ – and rejects agreements between Nicosia, Cairo, Beirut, and Jerusalem to facilitate gas exploration.

In the Aegean Sea, the main controversy between Turkey on the one hand, and Greece and the Republic of Cyprus on the other, concerns the legal status of islands in maritime law. In adherence with implementation to the letter of UNCLOS, Athens and Nicosia claim that not only do isolated islands such as Crete and Rhodes generate their continental shelf and EEZ but even the smallest ones such as Kastellorizo do (Tertrais, 2020). Turkey holds an equally maximalist claim of denying any continental shelf to Aegean islands, and counter-argues that UNCLOS is a *res inter alios acta*—it only binds its parties. Under the terms of several early 20th century conventions, Greek islands in the eastern Aegean are submitted to a complex regime of demilitarization (with distinct provision for three different areas). Ankara and Athens both dispute the applicability and the implementation of some of these provisions. In the 2000s, the above-mentioned EEZ agreements between Cyprus and its neighbors, coupled with the supposed EU position, drove a hardening of the Turkish posture. The "Seville Map" – a mere scholarly attempt to help the EU define its borders in the context of enlargement – aroused lively reactions in Turkey, where it is contended that the map is a firm representation of the EU and U.S. position. “*Based on that distorted and illogical map*”, Gürdeniz clarifies, “*on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004 the Greek administration of Southern Cyprus unilaterally proclaimed its EEZ on the basis of a single international legal delimitation instrument with Egypt, dating back to February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003*” (Ansaldo, 2020). According to the admiral, the Seville Map “*illogically and illegally*” assigned more than 1,577 kilometers of the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia to the island of Kastellorizo, which is located at 2 kilometers from the Turkish shore with its 18 kilometers of periphery. The dispute culminated in the November 2019 agreement with Libya, drawing a dividing line between the eastern and western parts of the Mediterranean, threatening maritime security, natural gas exploration, and new infrastructures such as the EastMed pipeline<sup>190</sup>. The deal created a maritime corridor between the two countries, considered illegal

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<sup>190</sup> The Eastern Mediterranean (EastMed) pipeline is an early 2010s project to connect Israel, Cyprus, Crete and the Greek mainland, crossing that stretch of sea object of the Turkey–GNA agreement, formally launched in 2020. It relates to an offshore/onshore natural gas pipeline that could: a) heighten Europe's gas security of supply via diversification of counterparts, sources, and routes; b) develop EU local resources such as the offshore gas reserves around Greece and Cyprus; and c) foster the development of a South Mediterranean Gas Hub. It is currently designed to transport initially 10 Bcm/y (billion cubic meters of gas per year) from the off-shore gas reserves in the Levantine Basin (Israel and Cyprus) into Greece and, together with the Poseidon and IGB

by Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus. Given that Libya and Turkey have opposite shorelines in the Mediterranean, Gürdeniz argues, the MoU is legally based on a concrete morphological and scientific fact.



**Fig.11: Maritime boundaries according to Turkey**

Source: Ansaldo, M. (2020) 'La Patria blu nel mondo post-occidentale'. *Limes* [Online] [06/01/2021]

In reaction to this perceived sign of disrespect for Greek sovereignty – as Greek islands such as Rhodes, Lesbos, and Crete – lie between the two countries, Greece expelled the Libyan ambassador in mid-December (Lindgaard, Pieper, 2020: 16). Italy and Greece signed a similar agreement in June, ending an issue that had been pending for four decades.<sup>191</sup> Moreover, Egypt and Greece consented to resume talks on demarcating waters between the two countries.<sup>192</sup>

The geopolitical temperature rocketed in the spring and summer of 2020 as the Turkish Armed Forces accompanied the drilling and seismic ships during their operations in disputed waters around Cyprus and Greece (European Commission, 2020). On June 10<sup>th</sup>, three Turkish vessels

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pipelines, into Italy and other South East European countries. Moreover, the pipeline would feed Cyprus internal consumption with additional 1 Bcm/y. IGI Poseidon (2020) *Eastmed* [Online]

<sup>191</sup> Latino, A. (2020) Italia: zone economiche esclusive e interessi nel Mediterraneo. *ISPI* [Online] 22 giugno

<sup>192</sup> Mourad, M. (2020) Egypt and Greece sign agreement on exclusive economic zone. *Reuters* [Online] August 6

targeted a French frigate monitoring the arms embargo against Libya (a NATO operation), alleging it had a provocative attitude. This prompted President Macron – the target of frequent personal attacks by his Turkish counterpart – to strengthen defense links with Cyprus and Greece and to try to mobilize European solidarity with them. Further, Turkey and Greece almost experienced a full-fledged military conflict in August, when two of their warships collided during a naval standoff over hydrocarbon exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean (Erdemir, Kowalski, 2020). The unfolding events in the Mediterranean hold the potential to further fan the already heated debate on Turkey’s NATO future and have a bearing on Turkey–U.S. relations as well. In October 2019, the US and Greece signed a defense cooperation agreement under which the US gains access to three strategic airbases on mainland Greece and an upgrade of the U.S. naval base in Crete. In December 2019, the U.S. Congress passed the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, a piece of bipartisan legislation.<sup>193</sup> It would extensively favor the Greek side within the Turkish–Greek balance in the Mediterranean, as it suggests lifting the arms embargo on Cyprus and intensifying security cooperation with Greece. It also authorized the establishment of a United States–Eastern Mediterranean Energy Centre to ease energy cooperation among the US, Cyprus, Greece, and Israel (Senicek, 2020: 7).

From the perspective of international law and, in particular, the law of the sea, Turkey’s recent maritime activism was condemned as illegal and against the principle of good neighborhood relations.<sup>194</sup> Turkish unilateral, provocative actions have affected negatively both EU–Turkey relations and the negotiations for a political settlement of the Cyprus issue. In December 2019, the European Council unequivocally affirmed its solidarity with Greece and Cyprus concerning provocative and aggressive Turkish behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea.

Following Turkey’s drilling and hydrocarbon explorations off the coast of Cyprus, the EU imposed sanctions on Turkey on grounds of violation of Cypriot sovereignty. These included the suspension of negotiations on the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement and the breaking off of high-level dialogues. Moreover, pre-accession assistance to Turkey for 2020 was cut, and the EU withheld the right to impose further restrictive measures in the event that Turkey continued its drilling activities in the EEZ of an EU member state (European Commission, 2020). As for the signing of the bilateral MoU between Turkey and the GNA, the

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<sup>193</sup> Congress.gov (2019) *All Information (Except Text) for S.1102 – Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019* [Online]

<sup>194</sup> European Council (2019) *European Council, 12-13 December 2019* [Online]

EU Commission report states that it infringes upon the sovereign rights of third States, does not comply with UNCLOS, and cannot produce any legal consequences for third States. It also denounces frequent Turkish breaches of Greek air space by Turkish fighter jets.

In October 2020, the European Council attempted the “carrot and stick” approach to hinder illegal activities vis-à-vis Greece and Cyprus. It called on Turkey to accept the invitation by the Republic of Cyprus to engage in dialogue to settle all maritime-related disputes between Ankara and Nicosia. As an incentive, the Council agreed to launch a positive political EU–Turkey agenda, placing emphasis on the modernization of the Customs Union and trade facilitation, high-level dialogues, people-to-people contacts, and the prospect of more funds on migration issues. Should unilateral actions or provocations in breach of international law take place again, the EU will recur to all the instruments at its disposal – including under Article 29 TEU and Article 215 TFEU – to safeguard its interests and those of its Member States (European Commission, 2020). At a summit on December 10-11, the leaders of the EU deferred more punishing sanctions, such as an arms embargo or trade tariffs, until after they consult with the incumbent Biden administration.<sup>195</sup>

However, there has been no progress on normalizing bilateral relations with Cyprus. For its part, Ankara appears to speculate that EU sanctions will be symbolic to a great extent for as long as EU governments proceed with restraint facing Turkish activities in the Eastern Mediterranean out of a tacit recognition of Turkish leverage with respect to the delicate issue of refugee control (Lindgaard, Pieper, 2020: 16). “*Any sanctions decision that can be taken against Turkey do not concern us much,*” commented the Turkish President.<sup>196</sup> So, if Erdoğan assumes he can get away with his aggressive policy without any punishing cost, he will not miss the opportunity, and that will entail more trouble for the neighborhood.

In conclusion, the Turkish assertive legal posture aims at shaping a new reality by combining a complete re-demarkation of maritime boundaries, a military buildup (which magnifies the risk of maritime incidents), and an implicit request to the EU to stop supporting its member states (essentially Cyprus) and instead undertake a negotiated settlement of maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean. It amounts to a strategy of coercion where, in the words of Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, “*the stakes are very precise, very*

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<sup>195</sup> Bekdil, B. (2020) Erdoğan’s Reckless Gambit: It’s Payback Time. *BESA* [Online] January 10

<sup>196</sup> Al Jazeera (2020d) *Erdogan: Threats of EU sanctions on Turkey ‘do not concern us’* [Online] 9 Dec



*clear: the credibility of the European Union*".<sup>197</sup> As foreseen, the 27 EU countries are split over how best to deal with Turkey. Cyprus and France have called for tougher measures like economic sanctions, but other countries are concerned about further prejudicing the country's already ravaged economy and destabilizing the region.

## **Conclusions**

Turkey is attempting to recover a dimension lost with the end of the Ottoman Empire following World War I. Its initiatives do not take place in a vacuum: given their increasing frequency, they can be placed in the context of an assertive strategic orientation, centered on the militarization of foreign policy instruments.<sup>198</sup> Turkey is pursuing a "coercive diplomacy," or a dynamic that will compel Turkey's rivals – including some of its NATO allies – into acquiescing to a new geostrategic configuration and, in the end, accepting a negotiated settlement that is viable and satisfactory to Ankara. Notably, it framed the new coercive turn as a strategic necessity, garnering legitimacy in the eyes of domestic constituencies, both supporters of the government and opposition parties. While its engagement in Syria and Iraq is contextualized with reference to countering existential threats to the country's survival and territorial integrity, Turkish policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya has been tied to the defense of sovereign rights.

According to Kardaş (2020), the drivers of Turkey's coercive diplomacy reside in "boots on the ground", "dirt on the boots, already", and "adversaries in dress shoes". The "boots on the ground" narrative consists of the establishment of a direct linkage between hard power and diplomatic influence and has been a hallmark of Ankara's recent foreign policy. The "dirt on the boots, already" narrative relates to the Turkish resolve to back its threats by force if adversaries fail to accede to its demands in light of the successful precedent of its first military intervention in Syria in 2016 against ISIS. Finally, "Adversaries in dress shoes" invokes Turkey's assumption that other countries will find it hard to escalate against it, because of either their aversion to "put boots on the ground", or their inability to mount a credible challenge.

As former EU ambassador and Head of Delegation to Turkey Marc Pierini notes, Ankara sees a *"historic opportunity to play hardball with a weakened Europe and attempt to weaken it*

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<sup>197</sup> Al Jazeera (2020e) *EU Summit: Turkish sanctions on agenda as Erdogan shrugs threats* [Online] 10 Dec

<sup>198</sup> Kardaş, Ş. (2020) Understanding Turkey's Coercive Diplomacy. *The German Marshall Fund of the United States* [Online] August 13

further”.<sup>199</sup> In fact, illegal migration and maritime security feature among the main threats to the EU alongside terrorism, cybersecurity, hybrid threats, organized crime, proliferation, violent conflict, resource and energy supply, and espionage.<sup>200</sup> Through what has been defined as the “*pact of shame*” (Greenhill, 2016: 332), EU member states have made themselves more vulnerable to future migration-driven coercion while simultaneously failing to focus either on the underlying structural issues or proximate triggers feeding the migration crisis.

From an EU perspective, today Turkey has a triple identity: a strategic partner for Europe, especially in the economic, trade, and migration fields; Europe’s adversarial interlocutor in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant; and a challenger within NATO.<sup>201</sup>

While there is no widespread consensus in the EU on how to handle Turkey, most members acknowledge that the country’s attitude crystallizes three of the leading current challenges the Union faces, namely sovereignty, the rule of law, and identity.

The Turkish ability to control two potential emigration gates (refugees from Syria and migrants from Libya) disputes the notion of sovereignty as controlling and defending borders. “Sovereignty” also has to do with enhancing energy security by diversifying the sources of supply. Finally, the current legal dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean challenges the ability of the EU to build consensus in its foreign policy: in September 2020, Cyprus wished to make the adoption of sanctions on Belarus conditional on the EU taking a strong stance on the Mediterranean issue (Tertrais, 2020).

Concerning the rule of law, some EU members (France in particular) view the current crisis through the prism of European attachment to and championing of international law and institutions. The defense of UNCLOS in the Aegean Sea is seen as exemplary due to the temptation of other powers (Russia, China) to encroach upon the sovereignty of their neighbors. Furthermore, they accuse Turkey of direct violations of the UN arms embargo against Libya.

Last, immigration from the Middle East and Africa, coupled with Turkey’s advocacy of a particular brand of political Islam, are often seen as potential challenges to Europe’s identity. In this regard, some have long seen the very candidacy of Turkey to the EU as an obstacle.

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<sup>199</sup> Pierini, M. (2016b) Will Turkey and the EU See the Bigger Picture? *Carnegie Europe* [Online] March 3

<sup>200</sup> Fiott, D. (2020) Uncharted territory? Towards a common threat analysis and a Strategic Compass for EU security and defence. *European Union Institute for Security Studies* [Online] Brief 16/ Jul p.6

<sup>201</sup> Pierini, M. (2020b) How Far Can Turkey Challenge NATO and the EU in 2020? *Carnegie Europe* [Online] January, p 11

In international politics, it is the law that usually follows in the footsteps of power politics, not vice versa. So, redefining the Mediterranean's maritime borders will likely reflect the balance of power on the ground rather than institute a novel balance. In the same way, a director-general in the Turkish Foreign Affairs Ministry was quoted saying on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019 that *“this agreement also amounts to a political message that Turkey can't be sidelined in the Eastern Mediterranean and nothing can be really achieved in the region without Turkey's participation”* (Pierini, 2020b: 4).

## 4. Cuius mare? Scenarios for Turkey and implications on the Italian national interest

*“Naturale è quindi per l’Italia la possibilità, e naturale il sogno, di dominare il mare in tutta la sua estensione”<sup>202</sup>.*

(Natural is therefore for Italy the possibility, and natural is the dream, of ruling the sea in all its extension.)

Fernand Braudel

### Introduction

The fourth and final chapter is devoted to the enlarged Mediterranean, where power politics is at play at both the regional and international levels. Competition for resources, power, territorial sovereignty, and migration are some of the numerous, complex stakes in the area. The chapter addresses the renewed prominence of the area from an Italian perspective, defining the vision behind the “enlarged Mediterranean” geopolitical concept, the country’s vital interests, and traditional foreign policy and defense approach to the region. Having scrutinized Turkish domestic and foreign policy in detail, I propose a Scenarios Analysis – one of the most popular structured analytic techniques for intelligence – exercise. As the hotspot in the Mediterranean area and a foreign policy priority for both Rome and Ankara, Libya lends itself to being a valid case study. Finally, after assessing the plausibility of each scenario, and describing the current Italian stance on regional tensions, I attempt to offer policy recommendations for Italy.

### 4.1 The renewed strategic centrality of the Mediterranean

Once the Roman *Mare Nostrum* and Constantinople’s “great Turkish lake”, to the Anglo-American security umbrella from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Mediterranean is today a “geopolitical paradox”.<sup>203</sup> In fact, it is a more interconnected and – at the same time – more fragmented region, riddled with instability, conflicts, and polarization. On the one hand, the Mediterranean qualifies as a platform of economic, energy, and infrastructural connectivity

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<sup>202</sup> Fabbri, D. (2020) Italia, penisola senza mare. *Limes* [Online] 9/11

<sup>203</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri e Cooperazione Internazionale (2017) *La strategia italiana nel Mediterraneo. Stabilizzare la crisi e costruire un’agenda positiva per la regione* [Online] 3rd edition, Rome, Mediterranean Dialogues, p. 3

between Europe, Africa, and Asia. On the other, it is riddled with instability, conflicts, and insecurity.

The 2011 revolutionary wave represents the starting point and thrust for the profound process of change that invested the MENA region. It took the forms of a regime change in some of its strategically most relevant states and a reshuffling of the previous regional balances of power.<sup>204</sup> The concept of the Mediterranean has progressively been “widened” taking over a larger slice of the hinterland. The perimeter of its challenges – from terrorism to migratory flows – has gone beyond the north and south shores to fully involve the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the Balkans, and that strip of land crossing the Sahel from West Africa and reaching the Gulf of Aden. As it expanded, the new "Mediterranean space" divided. It split horizontally along new sectarian faults, new areas of political influence, and new theaters of civil wars.

In its double movement to "enlarge" and "divide", the 21st century-Mediterranean has acquired a new global centrality as an epicenter of virulent crises, hegemonic competition, ideological and sectarian clash. Contentions for power and energy resources, state fragility, security threats, and socio-economic inequalities have rendered the area one of the world's most volatile regions, whose geostrategic importance goes far beyond its geographical borders. This is antithetical to the traditional vision of the Mediterranean as part of the EU's backyard, an idea that has underpinned the European strategic approach to the region for decades.<sup>205</sup>

An arc of crisis seems to have developed in two directions: from Tunisia to Egypt, passing through the collapse of Libya, the activated forces underwent an acceleration to unhinge the Shia crescent (Hezbollah, the new Iraq, and Iran). The straitjacket applied by Moscow and Tehran on Damascus held up, leading to a blowback, which traveled the same trajectory in the opposite direction. It caused three main effects: to bring about the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; generate a crisis at the top of the Saudi monarchy; and sharpen the divisions in the Sunni camp (Saudis / Egyptians / Moroccans against Qataris / Turks).

In the ninth year of the civil conflict in Syria and the opening of the peripheral front in Yemen, there could be a direct confrontation of the Shiite front – backed behind the scenes by Russia – and the unprecedented alliance between Jerusalem and Riyadh—openly supported by the United States, France, and the UK (Santangelo, 2020: 114). This strategic equation, however, is

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<sup>204</sup> Santangelo, S. (2020) L'incognita della Libia tra il fallimento delle Primavere arabe e il ritorno al gioco di potenze. In: Biagini, A.F.. *Tripoli, Italia. La politica di potenza nel Mediterraneo e la crisi dell'ordine internazionale*. Lit Edizioni s.a.s., p. 114

<sup>205</sup> Marrone, A., Nones, M. (2016) *Italy and security in the Mediterranean* [Online] IAI Research Papers. Edizioni Nuova Cultura

subject to intervening variables such as Turkey's power projection, Hamas's exit from the Iranian sphere of influence, the effect of sanctions on Moscow (whose impact is now being measured), as well as the institutional tensions in the US between the deep state and the electorate.

Against this background, the Libyan case is but an echo of the predicament of the East Mediterranean and the whole MENA insecurity complex, namely the interrelatedness of several elements of instability – geopolitical as well as domestic – entangling several international/regional powers and local actors/militias. This insecurity complex tends to be dominated by what Thomas Friedman referred to in a different context as “Black Elephants”.<sup>206</sup> The latter is a combination of two popular English metaphors. The “elephant in the room” denotes an obvious or controversial topic that we decide to ignore or neglect. As developed by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his well-known “black swan” theory, the metaphor encapsulates the concept that “*the event is a surprise (to the observer) and has a major impact. After the event, the fact is rationalized by hindsight*”.<sup>207</sup> Hence, the “new wars” proliferating are trapping the East Mediterranean into multi-layered conflicts whereas the State – the classical bedrock of international order – is declining.

In the resulting regional disorder, non-state actors – militias, jihadist groups, tribes, city-states, criminal organizations, networks of human traffickers – have increased their power, filling the gaps of governmental authority and undermining all forms of cultural and religious pluralism. The Mediterranean today is therefore a multipolar reality, where the centers of power have multiplied and the political agendas – starting with those of Teheran, Riyadh, Ankara, and Cairo – have become increasingly ambitious.

Within the background of simmering geopolitical conflicts, such as the long-standing Cypriot issue and the decades-long Arab–Israeli dispute, does the politics of maritime borders and pipeline competitions take place. The influx of refugees from hot spots in the region, such as Syria and Libya, to European shores in recent years has added a destabilizing aspect to the already fragile existing balance (Shama, 2020: 13). Unsurprisingly, the delay in seeking realistic diplomatic solutions to these unresolved conflicts has resulted in the region being militarized. This has taken shape through major purchases of weapons (including a large number of naval equipment), an increase in the number of military drills (particularly among

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<sup>206</sup> Korany, B. (2020) The East Mediterranean: Decoding the (In)security Complex. In: Dentice, G., Talbot, V. (2020) *A Geopolitical Sea: The New Scramble for the Mediterranean* [Online] ISPI Dossier, July 17, p. 4

<sup>207</sup> Taleb, N.N. (2008) *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Penguin Books Ltd

the anti-Turkey axis states), deeper military intervention in Syria and Libya (mainly on the part of Turkey), the recurrent harassment by warships of civilian and commercial vessels, and the seasonal escalation of vehement rhetoric among officials from the Mediterranean states. These critical levels of militarization materialize within the context of indefinite maritime borders, contested sovereignties, and overlapping licenses granted to oil companies to operate in coinciding zones. Perilously, this increases the likelihood of maritime accidents. Finally, the current COVID-19 pandemic and plummeting oil prices aggravate this fluid geopolitical context where a new balance of power is emerging with difficulty.

In addition to the security implications, today the Mediterranean has gained new strategic relevance as a platform for global connection. The doubling of the Suez Canal, the enlargement of the Panama Canal, the new energy discoveries in its eastern waters, and the project for a new "Silk Road" launched by Beijing make the Mediterranean a crucial junction on the infrastructural, transport, and logistic networks (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2017: 4). Its expanding economic system accounts for 30% of the global oil trade, and 20% of the maritime traffic. Its market recounts 500 million consumers whose GDP in the last twenty years has grown at an average of 4.4% per year. Moreover, the Mediterranean space can boast 450 ports and terminals, 400 UNESCO heritage sites, one-third of the world tourism, and 236 protected marine areas. These data seem to indicate a reversal of the historical trend of marginalization of the Mediterranean, first in favor of the Atlantic and then the Pacific. China – currently the foremost foreign investor in the Arab countries – has corroborated this development by choosing to open its first maritime base overseas in Djibouti, and to take control of the Greek Harbor of Piraeus through COSCO.

Lastly, the Mediterranean embodies a "microcosm" of global challenges. In fact, it catalyzes, in an extreme form, dilemmas that cross the entire contemporary world: the relationship between State-society, individual-community, politics-religion, inclusion-exclusion, identity-modernity, reason-faith, and security-democracy. It is also the region where cross-cutting issues that require a global approach overlap, with multiple geopolitical implications: demographic pressures, water scarcity, food insecurity, sustainable development, desertification, and urbanization (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2017: 5).

#### 4.1.1 The enlarged Mediterranean

The enlarged Mediterranean is perhaps the most interesting strategic proposal matured in Italy in the last thirty years. The concept – introduced by the Institute of Maritime Warfare of Livorno<sup>208</sup> – maintains an innovative political and theoretical value. In fact, it is capable of grasping the elements of the epochal change occurring in the 1980s, rethinking the Italian role in international relations beyond joining the Atlantic Alliance, and overcoming the cognitive limits of physical space. The enlarged Mediterranean extends from the meridian of the Canary Islands up to the Caucasus and the Persian Gulf.



**Fig.12: The enlarged Mediterranean**

Source: Ammiraglio Giuseppe De Giorgi (2020) *Il Mediterraneo allargato* [Online] Retrieved from: <https://www.ammiragliogiuseppedegiorgi.it/mc/481/il-mediterraneo-allargato> [15/01/2021]

It is a geopolitical theater that binds non-homogeneous contiguous areas: the Euro-Mediterranean, the most stable and characterized by cooperation phenomena, and the Middle Eastern and the Caucasian-Caspian, where the main crisis factors are concentrated. The center of gravity coincides with the Mediterranean basin, which retains its central role in the political perceptions of the various actors, while the Persian Gulf and the Caucasus area constitute its turbulent periphery.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>208</sup> Marconi, M. (2016) Dallo spazio fisico allo spazio relazionale: una nuova visione geopolitica per il Mediterraneo allargato? *Gnosis* [Online] Volume 22, Fascicolo 1, 32-41

<sup>209</sup> Di Cecco, V. (2004) “Un grande Medio Oriente” o un “Mediterraneo allargato”. *Panorama Internazionale* [Online] Informazioni della Difesa 2



According to this vision, the economic, demographic, energetic, and political connections make the region straddling three continents a single and wide geopolitical area.

Nonetheless, the fragmentation in the elaboration of this concept has not helped its ability to penetrate the Italian ruling class and, in general, public opinion.

The enlarged Mediterranean ideally refers to a successful intuition of the French historian Fernand Braudel, developed in the late 1940s. He suggested that the Mediterranean Sea is not composed of a single physical basin, but of a succession of seas and lands joined together by commercial, political and cultural exchanges that have come to produce, at their apogee, a much wider sea than that visible on maps (Marconi, 2016: 34). For Braudel, what mattered in the economy of the sea were the multiple relationships between men who, beyond the politics of identity, made up a united framework of common interests and complicity. Therefore, Braudel spoke of the Mediterranean as a "luminous center", whose strength of civilization went beyond the limits of the physical basin and gradually thinned out, so much that he could not clearly distinguish light from shadow. In other words, physical boundaries could not be precisely determined. Space was no longer an abstract container with its own characteristics but the result of the constant interaction between entities.

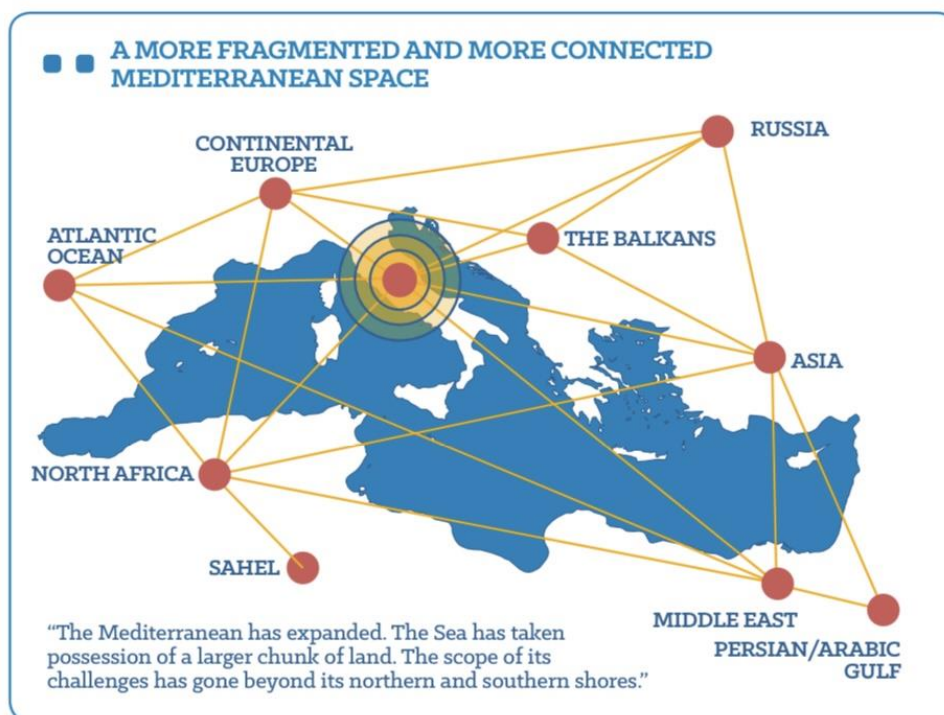
Along the same lines, the Italian Navy founded the delimitation criterion of the Mediterranean basin on an anthropic rather than on a merely morphological basis. The enlarged Mediterranean represents a regional complex with extremely fluid borders. It is a space in evolution, whose limits depend in principle on the presence of national interests in geographically distant areas and historical contingencies. This geopolitical chessboard reflects the conception of the Mediterranean as a real "liquid continent" or "vital space". The rigidly State-centric dimension of political legitimacy is in fact contrasted by a much broader and varied system of interests, and a juridical system that increasingly seeks to adapt or regulate the lawfulness of the interests pursued. This explains why, as a pertinent strategic element, the enlarged Mediterranean has been associated, directly or indirectly, with international alliances or organizations such as NATO and the European Union (Marconi, 2016: 37).

Hence, the idea has been introduced that security is no longer to be seen only in the defense of the rigid boundaries established by the Nation-State. Rather, it must necessarily project beyond, into the complexity of a world made up of conflicting, liquid interests, like the sea on which contention is increasingly being played.

The supranational dimension of the enlarged Mediterranean raises several concerns over

its role. Should it portray national ambitions or the principle of balancing interests between the states overlooking the area? Should it express an Italian strategic point of view or the concrete order of the sea? What are the prospects for regional stability?

A second problematic aspect relates to the convergence between geopolitics and strategy. Politics defines the direction, that is, “what” to do, while the military indicates “how” to do it. The lack of explicit geopolitical elaboration has deprived the idea of propulsion. To be precise, there is no vision of the Mediterranean, a way of conceptualizing relationships with other actors, and, above all, the project that Italy seeks to implement.



**Fig.13: A more fragmented and more connected Mediterranean space**

Source: Ministero degli Affari Esteri e Cooperazione Internazionale (2017) *La strategia italiana nel Mediterraneo. Stabilizzare la crisi e costruire un'agenda positiva per la regione* [Online] 3rd edition, Rome, Mediterranean Dialogues, p. 4. Retrieved from: <https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/12/rapporto-med-maeci-ita.pdf>

[15/01/2021]

#### 4.1.2 Italian national interests

Due to its unique geostrategic position in the center of the basin – entailing an exposure to many of the challenges originating from the Mediterranean – Italy is called to play a role of fulcrum in the Mediterranean area.

Italian interests in the region consist of restoring regional stability and socio-economic development for the benefit of Italian security and economy. More in detail, they are:

- avoiding fragmentation and power gaps at the country's borders;

- managing migratory flows;
- safeguarding energy routes and commercial shipping routes;
- preventing and repressing fundamentalism and possible terrorist threats;
- protecting citizens abroad and the operativity of large companies, such as the state-owned ENI (*Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi*) in Libya.

Italian national interests also possess a clear geopolitical connotation. They primarily concern Libya, where, according to ISPI President Giampiero Massolo, “*for too long we have contracted out every initiative to the United Nations without accompanying it with coherent national action*”<sup>210</sup>. Then, they address the Maghreb, possibly on the verge of new social upheavals; Sub-Saharan Africa, as the origin of migratory flows and jihadist settlements; the Adriatic, separating Italy from the increasingly unstable Balkans; the Eastern Mediterranean, where Italy stands in the background with respect to France and Turkey. Finally, they stretch to the turbulent areas manned by Italian military contingents, from Lebanon to Iraq.

The 2019 Italian Intelligence System for the Security of the Republic report to Parliament delves into the above-mentioned critical topics.<sup>211</sup>

A strategic relationship between Italy and Libya is crucial for the stability of the Mediterranean. In its absence, that great game between powers returns. The renewed offensive impetus of the LNA – also thanks to Russian support – and the entry into the field of the Turkish actor in support of the GNA, have determined a complete internationalization of the conflict. Over time, Libya has assumed a strictly strategic meaning for the various sponsor countries. Beyond the definition of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, relevant for the Sunni axis, Moscow and Ankara have carved their “spheres of influence”. It seems functional to guarantee both greater specific weight in North Africa and the Mediterranean. This development must be framed within the glaring Chinese projections in that basin and the entire African continent, and with the parallel – gradual but increasingly tangible – U.S. disengagement. Notably, power politics represents an indicator of the broader crisis of the international order.

Faced with the complexity of the illegal migratory phenomenon, special attention was paid above all to the evolution of the Libyan theater – where the persistent conflict could contribute to fuel departures – and to developments in Syria—where military operations, both in the

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<sup>210</sup> Massolo, G. (2020) Così l’Italia torna a contare nel Mediterraneo. *ISPI* [Online] 31 dicembre

<sup>211</sup> Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica (2020) *Relazione sulla politica dell’informazione per la sicurezza 2019* [Online]

north-west and in the north-east, have produced hundreds of thousands of refugees.

A decisive factor in driving clandestine migratory flows remains the criminal management of the routes, from countries of origin to those of destination. First of all, information monitoring detected the continuing activism of several criminal networks and their flexibility in adapting their modus operandi to their respective operational context. This is especially true of the North African route, but also of the Eastern Mediterranean route and the terrestrial Balkan route. Moreover, the report illustrates the persistent centrality of the false document sector, together with the increased role of social networks for advertising irregular travel (Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica, 2020: 17).

In this respect, the fight against criminal organizations dedicated to aiding illegal immigration from Tunisia resulted, among other things, in two police operations in 2019 – “Abiad” and “Barbanera” – with the informative contribution of intelligence (Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica, 2020: 92). Intelligence activity also supported important investigative developments on the Eastern Mediterranean route via Operations “Connecting Europe” and “Sestante” (Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica, 2020: 93). In 2018, the priority given to the issue led Italy to repeatedly ask for a rotation mechanism for the landings of migrants rescued at sea by the EUNAVFOR MED Sophia mission—replaced in 2020 by the Irini mission<sup>212</sup>. More generally, the Italian approach toward the Mediterranean area of operation (Aoo) has seen the conclusion of agreements with the transit countries in the Sahara and the Sahel, and with the local interlocutors in Libya, for the management and containment of flows, as well as sending a military mission to Niger.

Besides, central to the Italian interest is the defense of the military and economic, strategic nodes vital for the Italian “*Sistema Paese*” (national economic system). The globalization of the economy has accentuated interdependence among geographically distant countries involved in the same producer-consumer chain. Its continuity element lies in the sea and the global flow of goods/energy resources that cross it. Today, 90% of goods and raw materials transit along maritime communication lines, and 75% of this flow through few vulnerable forced passages (so-called chokepoints), made up of canals and international straits (De Giorgi, 2020). From Turkey to Egypt through the Gulf countries, the region represents a key destination for Italian exports, including in the aerospace, defense, and naval sectors. Considering the “blue economy” as a whole, shipbuilding and coastal tourism make up a significant share of the

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<sup>212</sup> Senato (2020) *Nota n.45. Da Sophia a Irini: la missione militare UE nel Mediterraneo cambia nome, e priorità* [Online] Nota n.45

national economy.<sup>213</sup> As Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio pointed out at the opening of the MED Dialogues 2020, in 2019, the trade between Italy and the MENA area exceeded €61 billion. 43% of it concerned only the countries of North Africa. The value of Italian exports was close to €30 billion, corresponding to 6.2% of the country's total exports.<sup>214</sup>

In the Indian Ocean, where the majority of world goods, 65% of oil and 35% of gas transit in terms of tonnage, ENI develops promising extractive activities. Of particular interest are the immense gas fields off the coast of Mozambique. The Strait of Hormuz, Suez Canal, and Bab el-Mandeb take on primary significance for Italy. The Strait of Hormuz is undoubtedly the pre-eminent passage for hydrocarbons worldwide, recounting about 20 million barrels per day, equal to approximately 20% of the hydrocarbons transported by sea in the world (De Giorgi, 2020). As the eastern gateway to the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal constitutes the main obligatory passage for Italy, jointly with Bab el-Mandeb. A hypothetical closure of the canal would result in an extension of the route to Europe by about 6,000 nautical miles.

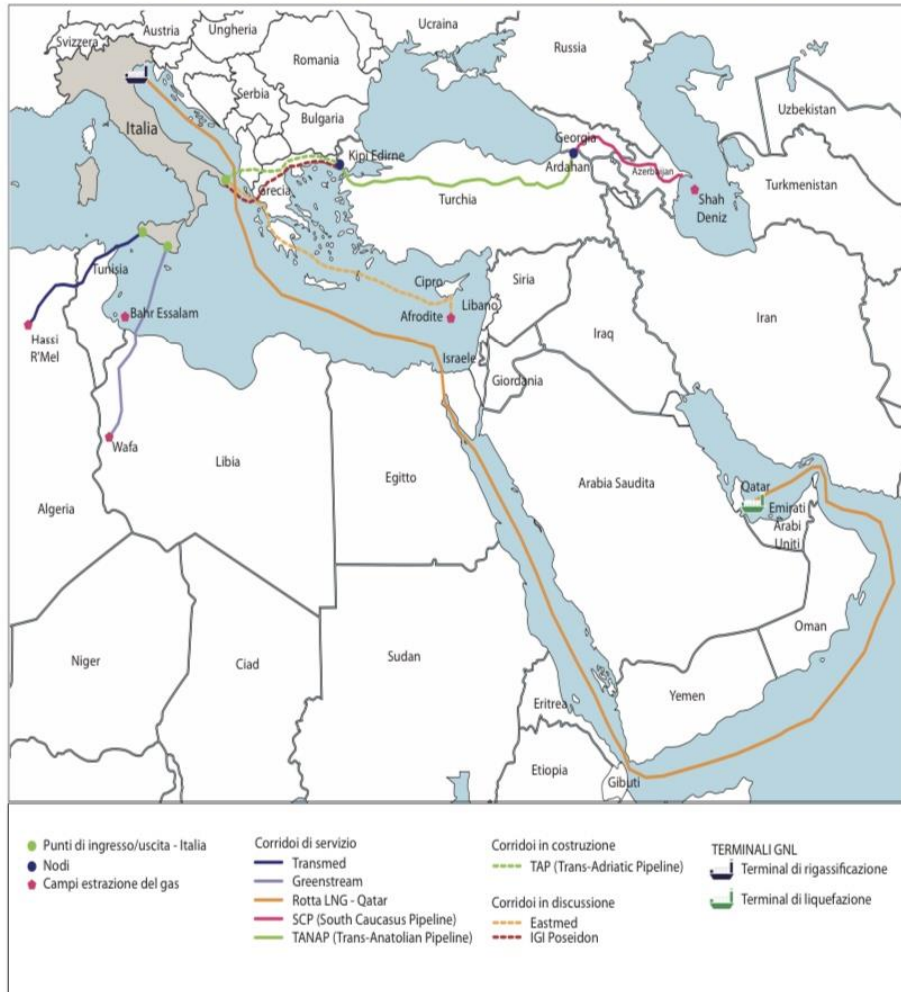
Chokepoints are subject to several threats such as piracy, maritime terrorism, the political instability of the coastal states, and the growing diffusion of more powerful and sophisticated weapons. The closure of eastern accesses to the Mediterranean would reverse the configuration of global trade to the detriment of Italy. Rome would be penalized by the movement of traffic from the routes to Suez to those that circumnavigate Africa, with the consequent point of embarkation and disembarkation of the goods in northern European ports rather than in the historic Italian Mediterranean ports. Hence, among other things, emphasis should be placed on the strategic importance of Somalia, Yemen, and Oman for the security of access to the Red/Mediterranean Sea to the advantage of Italian national interests. Not by chance, the Italian Navy engaged for years in the “*Mare Sicuro*” (Safe Sea) mission, which guarantees maritime safety in the Mediterranean also with respect to commercial traffic and energy activities (Marrone, 2020: 5).

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<sup>213</sup> Marrone, A. (2020) Security policy in the Southern neighbourhood. A view from Rome. *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung* [Online], p. 5

<sup>214</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri e Cooperazione Internazionale (2020) *Messaggio del Ministro Di Maio in apertura della VI edizione dei Rome MED Dialogues* [Online] 25/11

## IL MEDITERRANEO E L'APPROVVIGIONAMENTO ITALIANO DI GAS



**Fig.14: The Mediterranean and the Italian energy supply**

Source: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica (2020)

*Relazione sulla politica dell'informazione per la sicurezza 2019* [Online] p. 69 Retrieved from:

<https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/sisr.nsf/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/RELAZIONE-ANNUALE-2019-4.pdf>

[15/01/2021]

Finally, with all its destabilizing effects, the Libyan crisis has continued to affect the security of the entire Maghreb quadrant and the scene of the activism of extremists and recruiters who take advantage of the porosity of the border. Intelligence analysis revealed three relapses of the crisis, precursors of regional involution (Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica, 2020: 23). Firstly, the influx of relevant foreign mercenaries into Libyan territory, capable of negatively altering the tribal balance, especially in the Fezzan. Hence, the significant resumption of ISIS activism in a South now broken up by the crisis and vulnerable to the inclusion of terrorist acronyms in the area, including those relating to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb-AQMI. Finally, the risk of the emergence of routes that, through the Sudanese hub, lend themselves to being exploited to lead African returnees from the Syrian-Iraqi theater to the

southern desert areas, which may serve as logistical bases for a redeployment of fighters on the Continent.

The enlarged Mediterranean, then, implicitly suggests its own geopolitical vision, which can be summarized in two words: preserve and promote. However, the natural evolution of the concept should lead to marrying an explicit geopolitical direction, discussed in a systematic way and which engages Italy within a broader framework of interests.

#### **4.2 Italian foreign and defense policy in the Mediterranean**

Due to the national interests at stake, Italy considers the enlarged Mediterranean as the priority area of intervention of its foreign and defense policy. As Marrone (2020: 2) summarizes, five main characteristics define the Italian strategy toward the region:

- the search for political-diplomatic solutions as consensual as possible and shared with local and regional actors;
- robust, articulated, and long-term commitment by the armed forces;
- an integrated approach that relates the various challenges and places Italian activities within the framework of a sustainable development strategy for the region;
- full compliance with international law regarding the use of armed force;
- the constant search for a multilateral format for its action, at the political, diplomatic, and military levels.

##### 4.2.1 The three circles approach

There is certainly a broad consensus in recognizing that, from the end of World War II to 1989, Italy has carried out a fundamentally “regional” foreign policy mission.<sup>215</sup> During the years of bipolar confrontation, the sphere of action was limited, as a matter of priority, by the radius of “three concentric circles”: participation in the European integration process, the transatlantic relationship, and the Mediterranean area. In particular,

(i) the European circle concerns the EU integration process and relations with the leading Old Continent partners, connecting the various policies – such as trade, migration, neighborhood – and the intergovernmental and community levels in an increasingly holistic perspective;

(ii) the transatlantic circle looks to the United States and NATO, with a clear security and defense connotation, but also relevant economic implications. The reliable relationship

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<sup>215</sup> Ministero degli Affari Esteri e Cooperazione Internazionale (2010) *Dettaglio intervento* [Online] 11/03

with Washington proved to be enduring in the aftermath of the Cold War and irrespective of occasional diplomatic incidents and the color of the government in power;

(iii) the Mediterranean circle. In the absence of regional organizations that provide an adequate multilateral pan-Mediterranean framework for the Italian projection toward the southern shore, Rome traditionally pursues two lines of action. The first regards the development of bilateral relations with African and Middle Eastern countries. The second course of action, instead, places emphasis on the NATO and EU framework and aims to ensure that the latter devote more attention and resources to the stability and security of the region (Marrone, 2020: 3).

The three circles overlap, not only geographically – many countries on the northern shore of the Mediterranean are part of NATO and the EU – but also functionally, given the intense and varied interweaving of international relations. The measure of Italy's international status has therefore been the result of the sum of the country's geopolitical added value in the *Mare nostrum*, its spirit of initiative as a founding state of the European Community, and credibility as an ally of the United States.

Compared to this traditional geopolitical interpretation, the 2015 “White Paper for international security and defense” issued by the Italian Ministry of Defense introduces an innovation, indicating two reference regions for Italy.<sup>216</sup> One is the Euro-Atlantic area, including the countries of Europe and North America that are members of NATO and or the EU. It is defined by a high level of security, stability, and institutionalization of multilateral relations. The other is the Euro-Mediterranean area, which includes five, dissimilar areas that gravitate around the Mediterranean: the EU countries, the Western Balkans, the Black Sea area, the Maghreb, and the Mediterranean shores of the Middle East. Connected but distinct from the Euro-Mediterranean region are the Mashreq, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Persian Gulf region.

The White Paper notes that while the Euro-Atlantic area is relatively stable, and Italian participation in NATO ensures a solid security and defense framework for the Peninsula, the Euro-Mediterranean region is experiencing crises and instability which have a direct and negative impact on national interests. Therefore, Italy must commit itself to an effort to stabilize the latter. This involves participation or leadership in international military crisis management missions. The Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Mediterranean areas overlap, with Europe appearing to be the focal point of the geopolitical vision expressed by the document.

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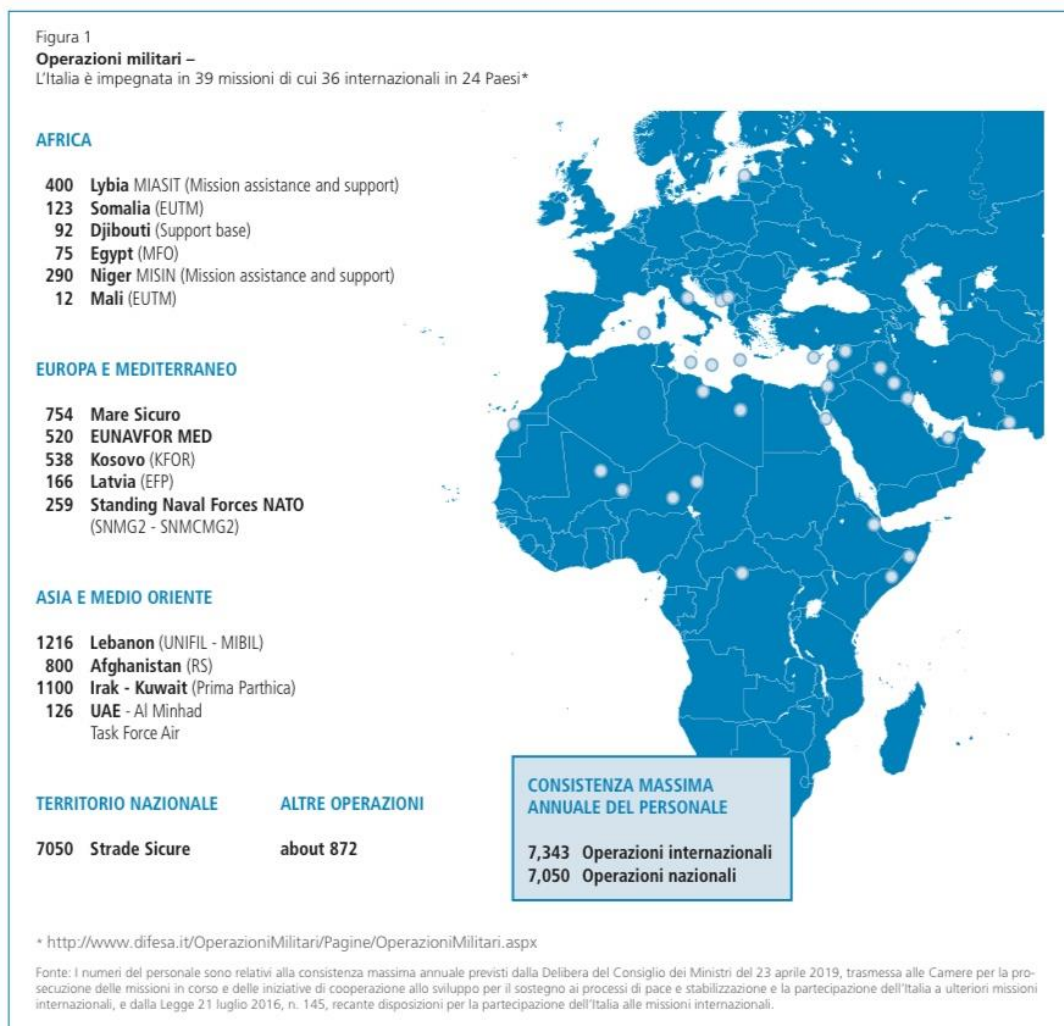
<sup>216</sup> The Ministry of Defense (2015) White Paper for international security and defence [Online] July



Five years after its adoption, the 2015 White Paper remains the reference point for the Italian armed forces. However, the broader debate on foreign and defense policy has returned to favor the Mediterranean concept to indicate the southern neighborhood of Europe. To illustrate this, while presenting its programmatic lines to the Parliament on October 30th, 2019, Defense Minister Lorenzo Guerini took up the concept of the “enlarged Mediterranean”. Hence, the most strategic document at the government level confirmed that the enlarged Mediterranean constitutes the geopolitical priority for Italy.

Given the persistence of conflicts, crises, and upheavals since 2011, the area is also identified, from an Italian and Euro-centric perspective, as an "arc of instability" which from Morocco to Afghanistan surrounds a relatively stable European continent. This area, therefore, requires a constant and significant deployment of the armed forces. As shown in the following map pinpointing the 34 Italian missions abroad underway in 2019, apart from the substantive contribution to NATO deterrence and collective defense measures in the Baltic countries and Iceland, the entire operational projection of the Italian armed forces is directed at this arc of instability.

Unlike other European countries such as Germany, Italy has participated from the outset in all major Western military interventions from Lebanon to Libya, from Iraq to Afghanistan, to the Balkans, often assuming leadership positions. The Italian armed forces have carried out combat tasks in both air and land campaigns, standing out in stabilization, defense capacity building, and security force assistance activities. The latter is also carried out by the NATO Center of Excellence established by the Italian Army in 2019, which deals with the training of allied forces to be deployed in crisis areas or in partner countries to build the local capabilities of the armed forces and security and related institutions (Marrone, 2020: 6). Notably, the Italian approach focuses on human security, including political solutions, humanitarian assistance, civil reconstruction, institution building, and economic development. It is no coincidence that there has often been strong civil-military cooperation, both in NATO and EU missions. Moreover, the Italian “*Sistema Paese*” has been activated in the theaters of crisis and in the fragile states of the region, through the support of a vast network of NGOs.



**Fig.15:** The 34 Italian missions abroad underway in 2019

Source: Marrone, A. (2020) *Security policy in the Southern neighbourhood. A view from Rome* [Online] Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, p. 3 [Online] Retrieved from: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/rom/16276.pdf> [15/01/2021]

In spite of the general assumption that the Atlantic and European circles had a preponderant influence, the Italian historical heritage and interests never let the Mediterranean drift away. In the wake of the two world conflicts, Italy had been recently unified and was manifestly unreliable. It felt pressured to gain international recognition and assure economic expansion to its society. Given the scarcity of natural and material resources and lacking close relations with the European countries, Italy perceived the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries as possible partners with whom to foster cooperation. In doing so, it would have gained relevance from the perspective of its Atlantic and European allies.<sup>217</sup>

<sup>217</sup> Amadori, M.E. (2016) Italy: the Three Circles Approach of Foreign Policy. *Mediterranean Affairs* [Online] Jul 19

The Italian pursuit of its objectives within the Mediterranean circle clashed from time to time with the interests of stronger powers in the other spheres of international relations. In such circumstances, Italian policymakers historically decided to alter their strategy rather than deteriorate the relationship with the United States or worsen its position within multilateral institutions such as NATO and the EU. Thus, so far there has been a strong attempt to place it at the center of the agenda of NATO and the EU, in the hope of coordinating the policies of member states and stabilizing the enlarged Mediterranean. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Italian parliamentary democracy is a multi-party system, where governments are governed by coalitions and the Prime Minister has limited powers over his ministers. In such a polycentric system, the EU and NATO have often been looked at as a landmark that would help find a national synthesis of sectoral strategies and or carried out by the various political-institutional actors (Marrone, 2020: 7).

The political push for the Alliance to commit more to its Southern Flank has been constant from all Italian governments over the last decade. As a matter of fact, NATO is the only security organization to bring all the main European countries, the United States and Turkey at the same table. Moreover, through partnerships such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, NATO brings the countries of the two shores of the Mediterranean into dialogue. The support of other Southern European member states such as Spain, Portugal, and Greece led, among other things, to the creation of the "hub for the south" at the Allied Joint Force Command in Naples. The hub has the mandate to dialogue with the non-governmental realities of Africa and the Middle East and spread a better understanding of the local reality within NATO. The latter helps to properly set the Allies' approach toward the region.

Italy looks to the EU as an actor capable of employing a wide range of tools, from military and civilian missions to neighborhood policy, for the stabilization of the enlarged Mediterranean. In NATO, Italy has traditionally nurtured the expectation that the American leadership would contain the projection of power of each major European country, thus mitigating some Italian weaknesses. It cannot happen within the EU in the absence of a hegemon willingly accepted by the other member states. However, Rome has often looked to the Union institutions with a similar expectation, while acknowledging the importance of the Franco–German engine for EU policies. In other words, Rome has worked for a convergence that would bring results and limit national, unilateral forces. Federica Mogherini's appointment as High Representative/Vice President of the European Commission, alongside the entire EU Global Strategy process, is in

line with this overall Italian approach. The first unilateralism to be contained regards France, who, since the Brexit referendum, has found more space to exercise greater leadership.

Due to the increasingly evident U.S. disengagement from Africa and the Middle East, Italy is taking note of the need to invest more in European defense, also to intervene militarily in the southern neighborhood of the Union. It is no coincidence that since 2016 Rome has not only supported important EU initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PeSCo) and the European Defense Fund (EDF) but is also active in a series of European military and civilian missions, from Mali to Somalia (Marrone, 2020: 8).

Moreover, in September 2019, Rome joined the French-led European Intervention Initiative, explicitly focusing on Mediterranean security (Marrone, 2020: 8). Doubts about an initiative outside the EU (and NATO) framework have been overcome for several reasons. First of all, it is in the interest of Italy to engage with its European allies in possible military actions in the enlarged Mediterranean. Among other things, this serves to prevent the well-known epilogue of the initial French unilateralism in Libya in 2011. It is precisely the problematic relationship with France and the still open wound of Libya – transformed from a partner for profitable 360-degree relations into a source of instability and insecurity for Italy and the Mediterranean – that negatively marks the public debate on which strategy to adopt in the region. The Italian resentment is such that Italy organized an international conference in Palermo in response to French President Emmanuel Macron's initiatives that in 2017-2018 legitimized Haftar as Serraj's equal interlocutor.

In addition, the “5 + 5 Initiative” was created in 2004 as a forum for dialogue between the countries of the western Mediterranean, five of the northern shore (Italy, France, Spain, Malta, and Portugal) and five of the southern (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania). This format exhibits the strong Italian commitment to defense: Rome actively managed the rotating presidency in 2018, and in 2019 led 11 of the 53 activities carried out under the Initiative. Not surprisingly, Italy supported the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue that began with the Barcelona process and resulted in the Union for the Mediterranean, also hosting the Permanent Secretariat of the Parliamentary Assembly.

Finally, thanks to its rotating presidency of the organization, Italy has emphasized the Mediterranean dimension within the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). For example, at the Mediterranean conference in Tirana last October, Deputy Foreign Minister Marina Sereni invited the participating countries to engage in a renewed and deeper partnership and a long-term vision (Marrone, 2020: 8).

In other words, due to its commitment to multilateralism, Italian foreign policy in North Africa and the Middle East has had to steer within the margin of maneuver left by the international community. Once the margin narrows down, regardless of the reasons, Italy abandons its aspirations. In addition, attempts to raise its profile within the international community have yielded limited results for a number of reasons: a clear objective-capability gap, unfortunate diplomatic misjudgments, and persistent domestic political divisions. A typical example is the so-called *Neoatlantismo*, the policy of rapprochement toward Iran and other countries in the Middle East envisioned in the sixties by then Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani, and Enrico Mattei, at the time President of ENI.<sup>218</sup> Thus, as Carlo Maria Santoro had affirmed 25 years ago, the Italian status in the international arena is uncertain and wavers between that of the “least of the great powers” or the “largest of the smaller powers”.<sup>219</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Rome’s current geopolitical posture

The conventional approach of Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean helps understand the current Italian stance toward the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and its southern and western neighbors (Egypt, Greece, Cyprus) on the demarcation of EEZ.

In continuity with the past, Italian policymakers show a tendency toward promoting bilateral relationships with other states in the region as a way to boost economic opportunities. It is particularly the case considering that all states involved in the crisis are central to Rome’s interests. On the one hand, Italy is the fourth partner of both Cyprus (\$743 million<sup>220</sup>) and Egypt (\$5.56 billion<sup>221</sup>), and the second for Greece (\$8.97 billion<sup>222</sup>). On the other, the Peninsula is the fourth trade partner of Turkey (\$19.72 billion<sup>223</sup>) that, in terms of market value, accounts alone for more than the three above-mentioned states together. Notably, it was the

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<sup>218</sup> Colombo, M., Vignoli, V. (2020) Italy in the Eastern Mediterranean: Between Continuity and New Challenges. *ISPI* [Online] 10 settembre

<sup>219</sup> Andreatta, F. (2008) Italian Foreign Policy: Domestic Politics, International Requirements And the European Dimension. *Journal of European Integration* 30 (I) [Online]

<sup>220</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution (2017) *Cyprus, exports, imports and trade balance By Country 2017* [Online]

<sup>221</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution (2018a) *Egypt, exports, imports and trade balance By Country 2018* [Online]

<sup>222</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution (2018b) *Greece, exports, imports and trade balance By Country 2018* [Online]

<sup>223</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution (2018c) *Turkey, exports, imports and trade balance By Country 2018* [Online]

Italian energy giant ENI to first discover the massive natural gas field in the Eastern Mediterranean in August 2015.<sup>224</sup>

ENI currently operates in both the Egyptian and Cypriot EEZs. It holds a 50% stake in Zohr, the main gas field in the area. The Italian energy company also owns 50% of the SEGAS Holding, that is, the owner of the LNG plants in Damietta (Colombo, Vignoli, 2020). It will prove to be essential for exporting Eastern Mediterranean gas to European and Asian markets. ENI is also the lead operator in Cypriot natural gas development, having rights to 50% of the Calypso gas field. Furthermore, Italy has a strong interest in maintaining its interests in the energetic market of Libya, as ENI controls nearly 45% of the Libyan oil and gas production. It entails maintaining a positive relationship with the GNA. Among other reasons to endorse the GNA, ENI fields are mostly based in the western part of the country, and the UN-recognized GNA is authorized to sell hydrocarbons on the world market, unlike its eastern counterpart.

Its self-perception as a middle power implies that it is unlikely that Italy will take any unilateral initiative in the area regarding the states involved in the crisis without anchoring itself to the US or other EU states. Rome is well aware that the US is against an escalation of the crisis between two NATO members (Turkey and Greece). Hence, Rome prioritizes exploiting its interests under given circumstances rather than attempting to change them. Accordingly, Italy refused to sign the EastMed gas pipeline project, announced in Athens on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020.<sup>225</sup> Greece perceives the EastMed as a tool to isolate Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean and, thus, gain a tactical advantage over Ankara in disputes over the control of the Aegean Sea and the territorial waters of Cyprus. Nonetheless, the general conditions of the energy market led Italy to regard the project as unrealistic and withdraw. Italian sources confirmed that the project was not feasible, and seemed to have been specially conceived in an anti-Turkish key and added that Rome has no intention of entering this antagonism. The traditional presence of ENI in Turkey, which has previously carried out highly strategic projects such as the Blue Stream – a gas pipeline that carries Russian gas to Anatolia via the Black Sea – may have played a role in the position taken by the Italian government.

In the current scenario, the Italian approach is markedly cautious and reactive rather than proactive. Accordingly, the Italian leadership deems preventing an intensification of the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean as the country's most desirable policy option. Italy's

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<sup>224</sup> Varvelli, A. (2020) Views from the capitals: Gas conflict in the eastern Mediterranean. *European Council on Foreign Relations* [Online] 16 September

<sup>225</sup> Yetkin, M. (2020) Insieme, Italia e Turchia possono cambiare il Mediterraneo. *Limes* [Online] 4/08

decision to participate in both “Eunomia”<sup>226</sup> – the Greek-led joint aeronautical exercise south of Cyprus – with Cyprus, France, and Greece and the submarine drill “Mediterranean Shield” with Turkey should be understood within this specific framework (Varvelli, 2020). However, in light of the analysis of past decisions, it would be wrong to assume that Italy will not take a side in the unlikely scenario that the crisis escalates. Therefore, Italy will likely follow the main EU states and the US should they implement a significant shift in their Turkey policy.

In Libya, too, Italy engaged in a search for equidistance between the two warring parties, as testified by the 2018 Palermo conference. However, alienating Tripoli caused Italy to lose the GNA's trust, forcing the latter to look for new friends – specifically, in the direction of Turkey. From the lack of Italian attention to the GNA stem the military and EEZ agreements with the Turks. As Italian foreign intelligence service (AISE) Director Gianni Caravelli commented, a source close to al-Sarraj’s government reported that the GNA expected more resources from Italy and would like to reduce dependence on Turkey.<sup>227</sup>

#### **4.3 Scenarios analysis on Turkey’s short-term posture in Libya**

In the evolving, uncertain situations that analysts and decision-makers must handle, the future is not easily predictable. Scenarios Analysis – or what the CIA’s tradecraft manual refers to as *Alternative Futures Analysis* – provides a useful framework for considering multiple plausible futures. Intelligence scenarios consist of descriptions in story form of a potential model future of the target (Clark, 2017: 261). Their purpose is to underline driving forces – or indicators – that are most likely to shape the future. In an alternative future as depicted by a scenario, a decision-maker should be able to develop strategies by identifying the following:

- relationship among forces;
- the probable impacts of those forces on a situation;
- the key decision points for taking action.

Past experience has shown that, among other things, scenarios can help intelligence analysts anticipate what would otherwise be unexpected developments by forcing them to challenge assumptions and consider plausible “wild card” scenarios (Heuer, Pherson, 20115: 137).

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<sup>226</sup> Ekathimerini (2020) *Greece, Cyprus, France and Italy begin joint exercise south of Cyprus* [Online] 26.08

<sup>227</sup> Bechis, F. (2020) L’interesse nazionale in Libia. Ecco di cosa ha discusso il Copasir (con il capo dell’AISE). *Formiche* [Online] 26/06

### 4.3.1 The indicators

Having established that Turkey is among the most prominent players in the enlarged Mediterranean game and that Libya is the hotspot where Italian and Turkish interests are most at stake, it is crucial to identify the driving forces that may determine future outcomes and monitor those forces as they interact in the future.<sup>228</sup>

The growing aggressiveness of Turkish foreign policy rhetoric and action in recent years is not conjunctural, that is, linked to the moods of a radical leader. Instead, it is the result of a variety of factors: Erdoğan's alliance with the MHP; the politico-psychological impact of the failed 2016 coup and Erdoğan's growing suspicion of the EU; the post-2016 marginalization of other forces linked to political Islam; the revival of nationalism in the military.<sup>229</sup>

Thus, Turkish assertiveness is an approach shared by a large part of the political world, despite the evident polarization between “friends” and “enemies” of the Turkish president. A corollary of this dynamic is that this phenomenon is destined to last as long as the geopolitical conditions that feed it exist, regardless of leadership.

Moreover, pursuant to the analysis conducted in Chapter 2, Turkey's withdrawal or expulsion from NATO will be regarded as a “wild card”.

In light of the above, the indicators I have chosen are the Turkish economic outlook and ties with the Russian Federation.

#### *The Turkish economic outlook*

The overall Turkish macroeconomic picture is more vulnerable and uncertain, given rising inflation and unemployment, shrinking investment, elevated corporate and financial sector vulnerabilities, and erratic implementation of corrective policy actions and reforms (World Bank, 2020). According to government officials, top businesses, and analysts, in 2021, the Turkish economy is foreseen to emerge from a prolonged slump and grow as much as 4% per year, propelled by revived consumer demand as the COVID-19 pandemic ebbs.<sup>230</sup> Overall, economic prospects will depend on new Central Bank Governor Ağbal's attempt to lower Turkey's chronic double-digit inflation due to Erdoğan's notoriously strong views about

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<sup>228</sup> Heuer, Jr., R.J., Pherson, R.H. (2015) *Structured analytic techniques for intelligence analysis*. Second Edition. CQ Press

<sup>229</sup> Cristiani, D. (2020) Mediare per necessità: l'Italia e le insidie del Mediterraneo orientale. *ISPI* [Online] Osservatorio ISPI-IAI sulla politica estera italiana n.13, 14 dicembre

<sup>230</sup> Coskun, O., Devranoglou, N., Caglayan, C. (2021) Turkey's economy seen regaining some pace in 2021 after slump. *Reuters* [Online] January 8



interest rates (the Financial Times, 2020). Moreover, Turkish financial dependency on what has been referred to as the “Strategic West”, the EU option of presenting further sanctions on Turkey for unauthorized drilling for natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean constitutes a crucial variable.

A severe and sustained economic crisis calls into question the financial sustainability of Turkish activism in foreign policy. It might also erode Erdoğan’s base of supporters, many of whom are committed to him, primarily because he has lifted them out of poverty. At the same time, Ankara’s pragmatic foreign policy shift has also served as a tool to preserve the political leadership’s standing in times of economic crisis in the country.

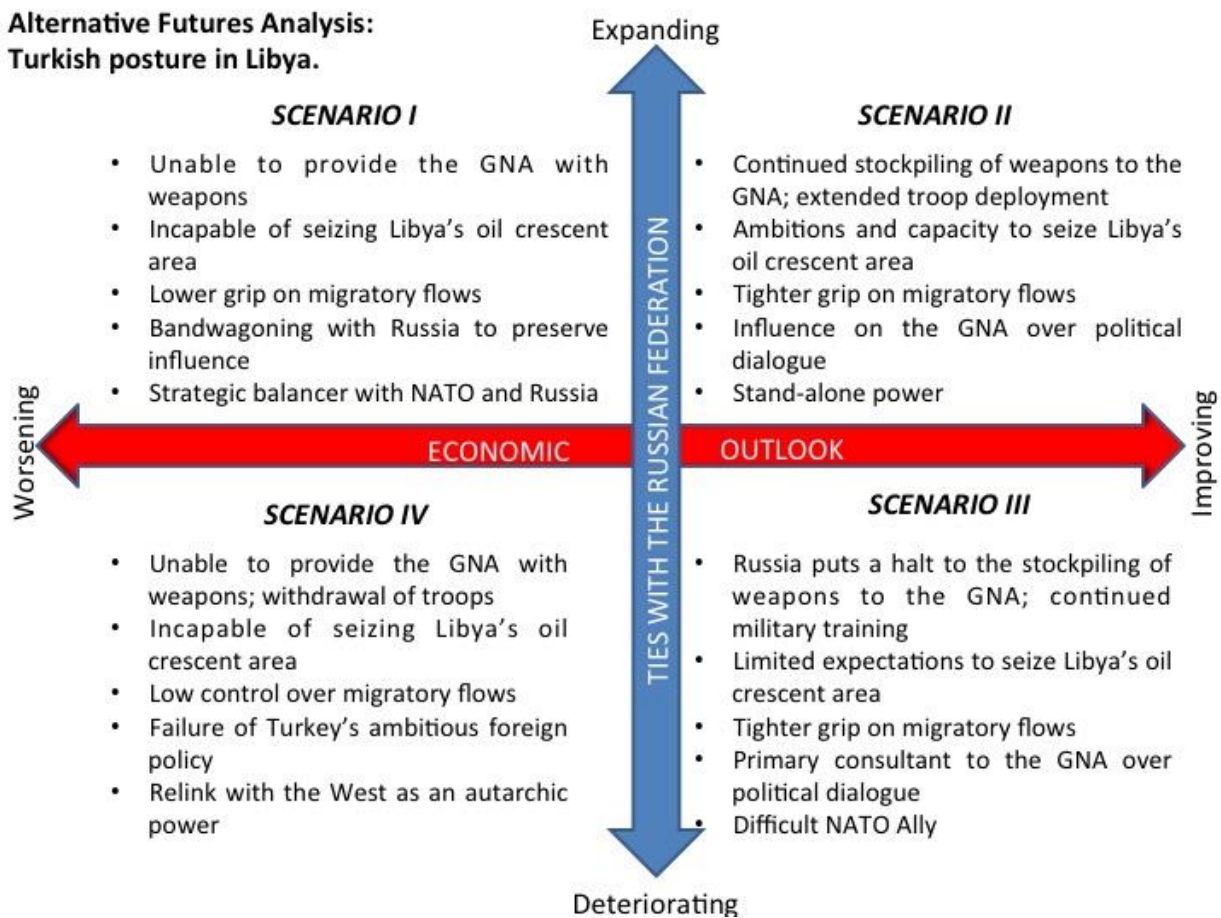
### *Ties with the Russian Federation*

As examined in Chapter 2, in recent years, Ankara and Moscow have intensified their bilateral relations, developing an effective modus operandi contributing to each party’s regional ambitions. However, their cooperation relies on a very delicate balance in three key hotspots, where Turkey and Russia are in different camps: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. On December 29, 2020, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu paid a visit to Sochi, where he held talks with his Russian counterpart, Lavrov, upon the eighth meeting of the Turkey-Russia Joint Strategic Planning Group. The two countries have agreed to carry out a comprehensive review of their bilateral ties and regional cooperation in the Syrian, Libyan, and Nagorno-Karabakh theaters, and to plan their 2021-2022 diplomatic consultations. “*We will evaluate all the dimensions of our bilateral relations. We have cooperation with Russia although we have differences in the regional issues,*” Çavuşoğlu declared ahead of the meeting.<sup>231</sup> While the ongoing cooperation in Libya and Syria is likely to continue, there is always the risk that new regional and international challenges will test the Turkish–Russian relations.

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<sup>231</sup> Cengiz, S. (2021) Turkey, Russia maintain delicate balance in three hotspots. *Arab News* [Online] January 08

### 4.3.2 Alternative Futures Analysis



**Fig.16:** An Alternative Futures Analysis of Turkish posture in Libya.

Generated by the author.

#### **SCENARIO I: Diplomatic posture.**

Prolonged inflation, a further depreciation of the lira currency, and additional EU sanctions will significantly reduce the Turkish margin of maneuver. Ankara will have to re-assess its foreign policy priorities, investing its overstretched resources in securitizing the more urgent Syrian border. A severe recession will also diminish Turkish capacity to seize Libya’s oil crescent area. The economic and financial leverage Brussels holds vis-à-vis Ankara is likely to tilt the balance in Turkish–EU relations in favor of the European Union. Thus, Turkey’s coercive power based on its grip on migratory flows will be lower. Expanding ties with the Russian Federation – whose pervasive action in Libya cannot be ignored – will lead Turkey to bandwagon with Moscow and more openly balance its ties with its NATO allies and Eurasian partners (particularly Moscow).

It is the most plausible scenario and would highly benefit Italian security and energetic interests. At the same time, the Turkish lira slump would have repercussions on the Italian economy due to the tight Turkish–Italian partnership.

**SCENARIO II: Aggressive posture.**

A decisive improvement in Turkish economic outlook will lead Turkey to flex its geopolitical muscle. The Turkish Parliament will authorize a prolonged stockpiling of weapons to the GNA and extended troop deployment to Libya. By virtue of its expanding commitment and military presence, Turkey is also expected to influence the GNA over the UN-supported political dialogue with field-marshal Haftar’s LNA. Renewed confidence, capacity, and resources might entail Turkish mobilization toward Cyrenaica. In fact, Ankara needs to get the whole of Libya under control to secure all its national interests, and a separation of the East would make the 2019 maritime agreement irrelevant. Furthermore, Erdoğan will hold a tighter grip on the Central Mediterranean migration route. In this most likely and immediate future scenario, Turkey will continue to successfully hedge the NATO and Eurasian blocks against each other to pursue its own interests as a stand-alone power. Hence, this would be the worst-case scenario for Italy.

**SCENARIO III: Provocative posture.**

Strained relations with Russia – a force multiplier for Haftar’s offensive – would frustrate Turkey’s foreign policy ambitions in its near abroad. It is possible that Moscow might put a halt to Ankara’s stockpiling of weapons to the GNA and limit its expectations to gain control of Libya’s oil crescent region. However, enhanced economic conditions would prompt Turkey to maintain its military training mission and hold a tight grip on migratory pressure. Ankara would continue to be al-Sarraj’s primary consultant within the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. Therefore, on the one hand, Turkey would continue to be a difficult and sometimes wavering ally. On the other, it would remain committed to NATO operations and policies and rely on the Alliance’s collective security guarantee. Relations with Europe and the United States would remain transactional, but divergences would be managed without disruption. In the short-term, it is the most unlikely scenario since Moscow views Ankara as a convenient partner. Russia derives two main benefits from striking temporary arrangements with Turkey. First, it avoids situations wherein it must wage an intensive, costly conflict over a long period. Second, a partnership with Ankara contributes to eroding NATO cohesion. From an Italian point of view, these developments would only mitigate the threat of inhibiting ENI’s operativity. Nonetheless, Turkey would still retain control over flows from Sub-Saharan Africa.

#### **SCENARIO IV: Modest posture.**

The simultaneous aggravation of the Turkish economy and ties with Russia would constitute a nightmare scenario for Turkey. Turkish incapacity to provide the GNA with weapons is likely to reverberate on its maritime agreement, a cornerstone of its foreign policy in the enlarged Mediterranean. High inflation would have implications on defense spending, bringing about troop withdrawal from Libya. This, in turn, would preclude Turkey from extending into the eastern coastal region of Cyrenaica. Recovery would require relinking with the West, even if as an autarchic power, and adopting a modest posture. Turkey's coercive power will thus be minimal. These events would signal a failure of Ankara's ambitious foreign policy. This unlikely scenario coincides with the most desirable scenario for Italy.

#### **4.4 Policy recommendations for Italy. Strategic self-awareness and flexibility**

By preventing itself from building a high profile in the enlarged Mediterranean, Italy has allowed other countries to take over the sea and fulfill their expansionist aims. From the Italian perspective, the risk that the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean acquire a Turkish–French dimension is particularly concerning. These dynamics would lead to a simultaneous strengthening of the positions of Turkey and France and trigger an inevitable slip of Rome into the orbit of Paris.

In light of the weight it enjoys in multilateral fora and the achievements made through diplomacy rather than with its effective power, Italy must combine multilateralism, bilateralism, and unilateralism more flexibly. This entails engaging in open dialogue with a variety of players. Among these, the Italian political elite should ensure the reliability of MENA countries and search for strategic depth in Africa. In Europe, Rome has to play ahead of its French and German rivals. As a *Sistema-Paese*, it shall pursue policies of modernization, rationalization as regards classical assets – diplomacy, armed forces, and industries – to fulfill commitments synergistically. It should also work toward aligning the vision of defense with that of foreign policy to acquire timeliness and resilience in the pursuit of national interests. Italy also needs to invest in hybrid diplomacy, leveraging its cultural, religious, and soft power and relying on an inclusive network of NGOs, industries, local authorities, and universities. At the same time, Rome should avoid wasting resources in multiple commitments and navigate within a credible range of action. Bound by its self-image as a good mediator, Italy must abandon its traditional culture of compromise and ambiguity. Most importantly, it shall escape marginalization and the risk of entrapment (as in Libya in 2011).

### *Exerting greater assertiveness in all multilateral fora*

Italy should pioneer the international system while keeping national interests in mind. It implies:

- Restoring the UN Security Council reform project including the regional dimension. Amb. Zappia (2020) underlined that the Security Council struggles to assume an univocal posture in the Mediterranean. A more regular presence of Italy in this body would positively affect UN action in the area and ensure greater legitimacy and representativeness. Due to the symbiotic relationship with multilateral institutions, Italy has as much to gain from maintaining effective collaboration with the United Nations as the UN can benefit in terms of effectiveness by drawing on the Italian experience and political capital accumulated through enduring commitment in the region.
- Security Council Resolutions. Within the UN, Italy must also strive for a resolution capable of preventing external support to the warring parties in Libya through targeted embargoes. The resolution should also target the surveillance of hydrocarbon exports and control of Libyan financial reserves overseas. The final goal lies in working for the entry into Libya of a multinational force backing the reconstituted Libyan institutions (Santangelo, 2020: 134).
- Continuing to push for the full sharing by all EU countries of the obligations and responsibilities of migratory flows.
- Redefining NATO priorities toward its Southern Flank.

In the legal dispute between Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey, Italian policymakers shall exploit their privileged position of neutrality to act as a bridge between the two blocks. This will have spillover effects over the direct defense of their investments in the Eastern Mediterranean area.

### *Engaging Turkey in energy diplomacy*

This strategy amounts to riding the Turkish wave in a tactical, instrumental way. The short-term convergences between Rome and Ankara are substantial. In Libya, Turkey is the only actor who, under certain conditions, may have a strategic interest in the stabilization of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Erdoğan sent signals to Rome – who settled the GNA in Tripoli – on the possibility of jointly exploiting Libyan energy resources. Haftar, on the contrary, has never shown any sensitivity toward Italian interests. Italy should also look with suspicion at the

Paris maneuvers between Greece and Cyprus, aimed, among other things, at advancing the interests of French energy companies.<sup>232</sup>

Hence, Italy might exploit the channel of energy diplomacy, favoring the inclusion of Turkey within the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), to foster dialogue on the concrete advantages deriving from greater cooperation in the energy sector. Moreover, this might facilitate unlocking other more complex dossiers (for instance, the conflict in Libya). The Italian contribution to overcoming the current impasse would also strengthen the country's ability to conduct a well-rounded foreign policy, both in its interests and in line with its values.<sup>233</sup>

#### *Taking advantage of second chances in Libya*

In Libya, Italy has the potential to play a leading role not only by virtue of the immediate repercussions of the conflict on core national and security interests, but also because of the deep knowledge of the country dynamics.

Amb. Zappia (2020) stated that the continuous political and diplomatic commitment toward both the Libyan parties and regional actors has helped to shore up the action of the UN and open the current window of opportunity. As a matter of fact, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) facilitated the first round of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in November 2020 in Tunis.<sup>234</sup>

Moreover, on December 4th, 2020, a meeting took place in Rome between Defense Minister Guerini and the head of the GNA military department Salahuddin Al-Namroush. It brought to the signing of a new joint military cooperation agreement, born within a broader process of stabilization of the Libyan situation. The meeting itself is to be considered as the first session of a joint Italian-Libyan Commission whose purpose is to draw up together a list of priorities for the development of the Libyan Armed Forces with Italian support.<sup>235</sup> The agreement provides for Italian participation in military exercises and maneuvers, the structuring and organization of military and security institutions, and the exchange of information and experience regarding the scientific research and military security fields. It also envisions a significant training plan for

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<sup>232</sup> Santoro, D. (2020c) Nel Mediterraneo Orientale la Turchia cerca l'impero. L'Italia ne sarà espulsa. *Limes* [Online] 11/05

<sup>233</sup> Colombo, S. (2020) La matassa del Mediterraneo orientale e il ruolo dell'Italia. *ISPI* [Online] Osservatorio ISPI-IAI sulla politica estera italiana n.12, 15 ottobre

<sup>234</sup> United Nations Support Mission in Libya (2020) *Libyan Political Dialogue Forum* [Online]

<sup>235</sup> Ministero della Difesa (2020) *Il Ministro Guerini incontra l'omologo della Libia* [Online] 4 dicembre

Libyan cadets, officers, and non-commissioned officers in Italy and Libya. In addition, Minister Guerini confirmed the complete willingness to collaborate to the creation of the Center for Humanitarian Demining (Training Center for Humanitarian Demining). The mine clearance activity requested by Libya from the specialists of the Italian Armed Forces will take place both under the aegis of the “5 + 5 Initiative” and on a bilateral basis. Given the longstanding Italian presence in the Misrata field hospital, the agreement also foresees medical-health cooperation and Italian-led training of nurses and doctors.

## Conclusions

Italy is in the eye of the geopolitical cyclone that is gathering over the enlarged Mediterranean. Nowadays, the (once) *Mare Nostrum* has turned into what Lucio Caracciolo has referred to as the “*Medio Oceano*”, connecting the Atlantic and Indo-Pacific Oceans.<sup>236</sup> Along the route of the Four Straits – Bab el-Mandeb / Suez / the Sicily Channel / Gibraltar - the Mediterranean links the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, where the match for global hegemony between the United States and China will be disputed.

Two paradigm shifts have contributed to placing the sea at the center of the strategic calculus of both great and emerging powers. First, the territorialization of the basins, a sign that for many – Turks in primis – the sea is no longer a common good to be shared. Second, the race for naval rearmament of the coastal nations of the southern and eastern shores displays the priority value assigned to the projection of power at sea and the defense of national interests.

The strategic advantage Italy holds is exceptional. Overlooking both sides of the Mediterranean, it is an unavoidable passage of every exchange and every flow. It finds itself on the frontline of NATO and the EU in the face of both risks and opportunities arising from the southern neighborhood of Europe. Since the Italian Navy remains among the best equipped in Europe – among the very few on the planet to have a real aircraft carrier – Italy can move in multiple directions without much effort. In a boiling geopolitical landscape, Rome is called to deal with several challenges:

- the match for the redistribution of power and prestige and the specter of downgrading;
- the crisis of multilateralism as a traditional anchor of Italian foreign policy;
- uncertainty about U.S. foreign policy;
- the collapse of the southern shore of the Mediterranean and the migration issue;
- the new deconstruction of the internal political framework and the decline of

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<sup>236</sup> Youtube (2020c) L'Italia è il mare, ma non sa che farsene. Le sfide dalla Libia al Mare Cinese [Online]

bipartisanship.

Its position in the center of the Mediterranean Sea notwithstanding, today Italy is unable to exploit this formidable multiplier of strength, influence, and wealth to revive itself. Historical, strategic, and demographic reasons lead Rome to turn its gaze to the mainland and toward Central Europe. As Dario Fabbri (2020) put it, Italy has contributed to the “deconstruction” of its near abroad, Libya being a prominent example. As a matter of fact, there is almost no trace of Italian influence with the exception of ENI, whereas Turks and Russians dominate the nerve center for the containment of migratory flows and access to energy resources.

In an interview with *Repubblica* after his trip to Libya, Italian Foreign Minister Di Maio declared that the solution “*cannot prescind from dialogue with all parties. It is not a question of equidistance, but of realpolitik*”.<sup>237</sup> Italy’s commitment to multilateralism and international law meant that Rome fully adhered to the UN-imposed arms embargo in Libya, probably one of the few countries in the area to do so. At the same time, the GNA's request for military aid fell on deaf ears because Italy refuses to take part in actions of this nature, especially in a historically sensitive scenario such as Libya. Therefore, once one of the main sponsors of the GNA, Italy has gradually slipped away to support this idea of equidistance.

However, the Libyan crisis proves that the risk of irrelevance in an increasingly militarized Mediterranean is enormous in the absence of military capacity, and above all, the willingness to use it if the conditions so require. For a country like Italy, it means being particularly vulnerable in a scenario where it will be increasingly difficult to support any desire for equidistance.

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<sup>237</sup> De Marchis, G. (2019) Di Maio: “Sulla Libia serve realismo. L’Italia non si schiera nella guerra”. *Repubblica* [Online] 18 dicembre.



## Conclusion

Late 2019 and 2020 marked a watershed moment for Turkish relations with its traditional NATO and EU partners, with Ankara carrying out a string of disruptive initiatives and adopting an increasingly assertive posture in the enlarged Mediterranean. Turkish leadership claims a more front-row role on the international stage, at an equal distance from all major powers, instead of confining itself to a narrow scope for action. On the country's Victory Day in 2020, Turkish President Erdoğan declared: "*We are determined to welcome 2023, the centenary of the Republic, as an economically, militarily, politically stronger, more independent, more prosperous country*" (Pierini, Siccardi, 2021). The President mentioned "*critical accomplishments from Syria to Libya, from the Black Sea to [the] Eastern Mediterranean*" as the "*clearest indication of our will to protect our country's rights and interests.*" In fact, the efficient Turkish use of tactical drones in Syria, Azerbaijan, and Libya illustrates that these assets were not only a military but, most importantly, a political game-changer, paving the way for Ankara's greater involvement and influence in these conflicts. As a result, Turkey emerged as a regional partner nobody could ignore and few could confront. At the same time, Erdoğan's foreign policy and security choices have caused strained ties with the US, the EU, and Russia, troubled relations with its neighbors, and growing isolation in the region—with the exception of Qatar and the Libyan GNA.

The overarching objective of Turkish geopolitical adventurism is evident. 2023 will be the year of a presidential election the leadership cannot afford to lose and of the centennial celebrations of the Republic, which it cannot miss. This domestic political imperative will continue to shape Turkey's foreign policy in the near future. Nonetheless, the Turkish leadership is inclined to repeatedly adjusting its foreign policy narratives to suit domestic political requirements. It causes foreign policy uncertainty for Ankara's European and transatlantic partners because Turkey concurrently plays friend and foe.

Within the context of global turbulence, which has deepened because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis has argued that Turkey will remain committed to pragmatic activism on the basis of its national interests. Ankara has proved that its interests are better served through a hedging strategy, balancing between historical ties to the "Strategic West" and recently improving relations with countries like Russia and China. In this logic, Turkey has engaged in the so-called "coronavirus diplomacy", that is, sending medical aid to rectify damaged international relations and play a key role in the post-COVID world.<sup>238</sup> By virtue of productive

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<sup>238</sup> Tol, G., Bechev, D. (2020) Can corona diplomacy cure Turkey's foreign policy isolation? *Middle East Institute* [Online] April 29

textile and manufacturing sectors, Ankara provided more than 50 countries all around the world with masks and other medical protective equipment. It was particularly dynamic vis-à-vis the West, especially Europe and the United States. NATO countries, including Italy, the United Kingdom, and Spain benefitted from Turkish assistance through the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Centre (EADRCC), the Alliance's main civil emergency response mechanism. Ankara has even made overtures to its adversaries. On April 10th, the government authorized the sale of first aid supplies to Israel, with which relations have been icy since the late 2000s. However, it will take more than intense coronavirus diplomacy and new rhetoric to restore bilateral relations.

Above all, posited that it is its capabilities that will determine the limits of this activism, Turkey will continue to behave like an imperial nation even if Turkey realigns with its traditional Western allies in the short-run. Therefore, it will be a challenging foreign policy partner due to the changes ushered in by Erdoğan. The author believes that these changes are becoming a permanent feature of Turkish political and social life—beyond Erdoğan.

In the first months of 2020, the military cooperation agreement signed by Ankara and Tripoli and Rome's refusal to affix its signature to the EastMed pipeline project changed the strategic equation in the Eastern Mediterranean and, as a consequence, the course of events in Libya. The parallel moves played in the military and economic fields have sealed a rapprochement between Turkey and Italy. The turning point was celebrated on January 13<sup>th</sup> with the meeting in Ankara between Turkish President Erdoğan and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte (Yetkin, 2020). Meanwhile, an intelligence operation was underway that would further consolidate the reconciliation between Italy and Turkey. Turkish sources claim that the Italian foreign intelligence service (AISE) requested the intervention of its Turkish counterpart, the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) to address the case of Silvia Romano, an Italian volunteer who was kidnapped in the Kenyan province of Kilifi by the militants of Al-Shabaab – Al-Qaeda's wing in East Africa – and probably conducted in Somalia (Yetkin, 2020). After months of covert work, on the night between May 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, the operation to free the aid worker took place. She was then handed over to the Italian authorities and repatriated on May 10<sup>th</sup>.

It is evident that one of the main objectives of Italian–Turkish cooperation in Libya is to hinder the flow of refugees from Africa to Europe via the Italian peninsula. The numerous naval exercises carried out in recent months by the Turkish and Italian navies within NATO or bilaterally in the Mediterranean, including Libyan waters, were conducted precisely in light of this need. In May Di Maio intended to send a calming signal to Ankara by establishing that the

Irini mission of the European Union would also cover the border between Egypt and Libya, from where Egyptian supplies to Haftar come from. The rapprochement between Turkey and Italy could also have an impact on relations between Ankara and the European Union. Rome has continuously supported Ankara's entry into the EU. If political developments are highly unlikely, the economic and commercial dimensions of these relations could accelerate in the near future.

The improvement in relations between Rome and Ankara occurred at the same time as the French attempt to increase its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, mainly through Syria and Cyprus. Both countries perceived this move as hostile. Italy has no intention of losing the commercial advantages it has enjoyed for centuries in the Eastern Mediterranean and has an economic interest in updating the agreement on customs union between Turkey and the European Union.

Therefore, the geopolitical priorities of the two countries in the Mediterranean tend to overlap without conflicting. Italy should profit from the transformative effects produced by their coordinated intervention. This could become the nucleus of a new Mediterranean order.

In conclusion, those who are not willing and capable to defend their interests risk finding themselves without interests to defend. In the enlarged Mediterranean, the objective pursued by Ankara through its geopolitical adventurism is precisely to thin out the squad of players. As Daniele Santoro (2020c) summarized, you are either an actor or the stakes. Rome should engage in a more demanding dialogue with Ankara, striking a compromise between aggressive unilateralism and full multilateralism contrary to its national interests. Otherwise, it will eventually become the most coveted prey of the great Mediterranean game.

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## SUMMARY

Long considered marginal after the end of the Cold War, the Mediterranean is now experiencing a period of profound internal restructuring that reaffirms its geopolitical centrality. The reasons are manifold. First, its geographical location makes it a privileged theater at the intersection of the European, African and Asian continents. Accordingly, it has rediscovered a pivotal role in the global maritime system. Second, the strategic reorientation of the United States toward the Indo-Pacific – where the struggle for global hegemony will be played out – has unsettled the traditional balance of power along the southern shore, causing widespread instability. Finally, the launch of a vast race for naval rearmament displays the priority value assigned to the projection of power at sea and the defense of national interests.

As a consequence, the enlarged Mediterranean is increasingly becoming the arena of competition between old and new global powers, namely the United States, China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf countries. Furthermore, the Libyan and Syrian crises suggest that – with Americans increasingly inclined to abdicate their role as a global policeman, particularly in the Mediterranean – the actors engaged in the basin conceive the military tool in Clausewitzian terms, that is, as a tool to pursue politics by other means.

Turkey has aptly exploited a series of circumstances in order to build the premises for political and regional influence deriving from the Syrian and Libyan quagmire in the broader enlarged Mediterranean. Scholars have described Turkey's heavily militarized foreign policy as "filling the voids and correcting the wrongs". As a matter of fact, it hinges on the accelerated U.S. disengagement from the Mediterranean and the Middle East; the absence of the European Union as a diplomatic actor throughout the region; and the persistence of unresolved disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus, and the South Caucasus, which Ankara sees as critical for its interests. Turkey's disruptive international posture is also rooted in domestic politics, as its foreign policy target a variety of topics on which there is widespread consensus at home: the Kurdish insurgency, the rights of the Turkish Cypriot community, access to Eastern Mediterranean waters, and Azerbaijan's rights over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

A crucial pillar of NATO during the Cold War, a reliable member of the Council of Europe, and a promising EU candidate country, Turkey is currently adopting the posture of a disruptive partner for the West. Turkish leadership claims a more front-row role on the international stage, at an equal distance from all major powers, instead of confining itself to a narrow scope for action. Erdoğan mentioned "*critical accomplishments from Syria to Libya,*

*from the Black Sea to [the] Eastern Mediterranean*” as the “*clearest indication of our will to protect our country’s rights and interests.*” In fact, the efficient Turkish use of tactical drones in Syria, Azerbaijan, and Libya illustrates that these assets were not only a military but, most importantly, a political game-changer, paving the way for Ankara’s greater involvement and influence in these conflicts. Meanwhile, Ankara’s rule-of-law architecture has been steadily dismantled and its economy is suffering from incongruous policies and years of cronyism, determining political unreliability.

Within the context of global turbulence, which has deepened because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey will remain committed to pragmatic activism on the basis of its national interests. As a result, it emerged as a regional partner nobody could ignore and few could confront. Erdoğan’s foreign policy and security choices have caused strained ties with the US, the EU, and Russia, troubled relations with its neighbors, and growing isolation in the region—with the exception of Qatar and the Libyan GNA.

The Turkish quest for autonomy does not constitute a novel phenomenon. There has been a robust element of self-realization in the foreign policy vision of Turkey since the end of the Cold War. Within the span of a few decades, it grew into a trading state with one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and this advancement significantly shaped the basis of Turkish foreign policy thinking from security to the economy. Rather than a threat to national security, Turkey’s geostrategic position was now regarded as beneficial for the country in terms of trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. Thus, in the 2000s, Ankara retained its ambition of magnified leverage wedded to a realist-based foreign policy, sustained by the current Turkish elite belief that Turkey is a prospective central power and possesses the economic means to sustain its objectives. Developments under Erdoğan – from new bridges, hospitals, tunnels, and airports to foreign troop deployments, a light aircraft carrier, new submarines, Turkish-manufactured armed drones – are functional to a single thread, that of a 2023 strategy. In fact, what may sound irreconcilable to Western observers reveals a more compelling rationale in the Turkish context, shaped primarily by the next presidential election scheduled in principle for June 2023, ahead of the Republic of Turkey’s centennial in October. This domestic political imperative will continue to shape Turkey’s foreign policy in the near future. It is evident that President Erdoğan intends to surpass – and in some ways reverse – Atatürk’s legacy. Similarly, the centennial must affirm Turkish power and modernity and revitalize its influence in the former Ottoman arena.

In 2016, Turkey found itself stuck between an alliance unsympathetic to its needs – NATO and, in particular, the US – in Syrian territories east of the Euphrates, and a strong rival – Russia – to the west. This *annus horribilis* dusted off Turkey’s Achilles’ heel during the transformation process of the Alliance, namely feeling squashed between its traditional allies and its neighbors to the north, east, and south. Embracing his pragmatic side when he deems it convenient, the Turkish President has proven himself capable of course correction in foreign policy, as clearly emerges from the Syrian chessboard. Ankara has shown that its interests are better served through a hedging strategy, balancing between historical ties to the “Strategic West” and recently improving relations with countries like Russia in order to accommodate its power politics agenda. Being natural rivals, the prospect of a Turkish–Russian imperial confederation is undoubtedly a geopolitical antinomy. To sum up, there is no substantial Turkish pivot toward Russia that could seriously harm Turkey-NATO relations. Turkey is expected to try to balance against Russia than to expand security and defense cooperation with Moscow much further. Such a course of action would only intensify Turkey’s dependence on and vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia, and therefore contravene Ankara’s goal of greater strategic autonomy. To sum up, Ankara is progressively acting on its own to secure what it perceives as core national interests—even if it means confronting Western allies. Overall, this does not by itself herald a fundamental shift in Turkey’s international orientation, but undoubtedly makes Turkey a more challenging partner for the United States and Europe.

Turkey is attempting to recover a dimension lost with the end of the Ottoman Empire following World War I. Its initiatives do not take place in a vacuum: given their increasing frequency, they can be placed in the context of an assertive strategic orientation, centered on the militarization of foreign policy instruments. Turkey is pursuing a “coercive diplomacy,” or a dynamic that will compel Turkey’s rivals – including some of its NATO allies – into acquiescing to a new geostrategic configuration and, in the end, accepting a negotiated settlement that is viable and satisfactory to Ankara. Notably, it framed the new coercive turn as a strategic necessity, garnering legitimacy in the eyes of domestic constituencies, both supporters of the government and opposition parties. While its engagement in Syria and Iraq is contextualized with reference to countering existential threats to the country’s survival and territorial integrity, Turkish policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya has been tied to the defense of sovereign rights. Ankara sees a “historic opportunity to play hardball with a weakened Europe and attempt to weaken it further”. Through what has been defined as the “pact of shame” EU member states have made themselves more vulnerable to future migration-

driven coercion while simultaneously failing to focus either on the underlying structural issues or proximate triggers feeding the migration crisis.

Italy is in the eye of the geopolitical cyclone that is gathering over the enlarged Mediterranean. The strategic advantage it holds is exceptional. It finds itself on the frontline of NATO and the EU in the face of both risks and opportunities arising from the southern neighborhood of Europe. Since the Italian Navy remains among the best equipped in Europe – among the very few on the planet to have a real aircraft carrier – Italy can move in multiple directions without much effort.

Its position in the center of the Mediterranean Sea notwithstanding, today Italy is unable to exploit this formidable multiplier of strength, influence, and wealth to revive itself. Historical, strategic, and demographic reasons lead Rome to turn its gaze to the mainland and toward Central Europe. Moreover, due to its commitment to multilateralism, Italian foreign policy in North Africa and the Middle East has had to steer within the margin of maneuver left by the international community. Accordingly, Italy has contributed to the “deconstruction” of its near abroad, Libya being a prominent example. As a matter of fact, there is almost no trace of Italian influence with the exception of ENI, whereas Turks and Russians dominate the nerve center for the containment of migratory flows and access to energy resources.

Posited that it is its capabilities that will determine the limits of this activism, Turkey will continue to behave like an imperial nation even if it realigns with its traditional Western allies in the short-run. Therefore, it will be a challenging foreign policy partner due to the changes ushered in by Erdogan. The author believes that these changes are becoming a permanent feature of Turkish political and social life—beyond Erdoğan.

In light of the Alternative Futures Analysis – where the Turkish economic outlook and ties with the Russian Federation have been selected as key drivers – a modest Turkish posture in Libya coincides with the most desirable scenario for Italy.

Due to the weight it enjoys in multilateral fora and the achievements made through diplomacy rather than with its effective power, Italy must combine multilateralism, bilateralism, and unilateralism more flexibly. As a *Sistema-Paese*, it shall pursue policies of modernization, rationalization as regards classical assets – diplomacy, armed forces, and industries – to fulfill commitments synergistically. It should also work toward aligning the vision of defense with that of foreign policy to acquire timeliness and resilience in the pursuit of national interests.

Among policy recommendations for Italy to promote and preserve its core interests in the



enlarged Mediterranean, the author suggests:

- exerting greater assertiveness in all multilateral fora;
- engaging Turkey in energy diplomacy;
- taking advantage of second chances in Libya (through the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and the new joint military cooperation agreement with the GNA).

In addition, the geopolitical priorities of Italy and Turkey in the Mediterranean tend to overlap without conflicting. Italy should profit from the transformative effects produced by their intelligence cooperation – i.e. the case of Silvia Romano – and coordinated naval exercises to hinder refugee and migrant flows. This could become the nucleus of a new Mediterranean order.

In conclusion, those who are not willing and capable to defend their interests risk finding themselves without interests to defend. In the enlarged Mediterranean, the objective pursued by Ankara through its geopolitical adventurism is precisely to thin out the squad of players. You are either an actor or the stakes. Rome should engage in a more demanding dialogue with Ankara, striking a compromise between aggressive unilateralism and full multilateralism contrary to its national interests. Otherwise, it will eventually become the most coveted prey of the great Mediterranean game.