

# Making Sense of Turkey's Foreign Policy from the Perspective of Neorealism

**Tarık OĞUZLU**

Prof. Dr., Department of Political Science and International Relations, İstanbul Aydın University,  
İstanbul

**Ahmet Kasım HAN**

Prof. Dr., Department of Political Science and International Relations, Beykoz University, İstanbul

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**E-mail: [uidergisi@gmail.com](mailto:uidergisi@gmail.com)**

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# Making Sense of Turkey's Foreign Policy from the Perspective of Neorealism

Tarık OĞUZLU

Prof. Dr., Department of Political Science and International Relations, İstanbul Aydın University, İstanbul  
E-mail: [tarikoguzlu@aydin.edu.tr](mailto:tarikoguzlu@aydin.edu.tr)  
Orcid: 0000-0002-5422-6203

Ahmet Kasım HAN

Prof. Dr., Department of Political Science and International Relations, Beykoz University, İstanbul  
E-mail: [han@beykoz.edu.tr](mailto:han@beykoz.edu.tr)  
Orcid: 0000-0003-4162-0014

## ABSTRACT

This study singles out the impact of systemic and external factors on Turkey's foreign policy from the establishment of the Republic until now. Such an exercise accords with a neorealist interpretation of foreign policy, as the key emphasis is on the impact of the anarchical nature of the external environment, and the influence of the distribution of material power capabilities among states at a given time on foreign policy preferences. This in no way suggests that the internal and individual level of factors holds a secondary place in comparison to systemic/external factors. Yet this article simply highlights the importance of systemic factors, for the main reason that neorealism seems to account for foreign policy choices and behaviors of middle powers more convincingly than in the case of great powers.

**Keywords:** Structural realism, International Relations Theory, Republic of Turkey, foreign policy, polarity

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## Introduction

Making sense of Turkish foreign policy since the foundation of the Republic requires an in-depth analysis of individual, internal and external factors in a comprehensive manner. However, rather than taking into account all such factors, this study singles out the impact of systemic and external factors on the formulation and implementation of Turkey's foreign policy decisions. Such an exercise would accord with a neorealist interpretation of Turkish foreign policy (TFP), as the main emphasis will be on the impact of the anarchical nature of the external environment, and the influence of the distribution of material power capabilities among states at a given time on their foreign policy choices. This in no way suggests that the internal and individual level of factors holds secondary place in comparison to systemic/external factors. For example, it is already known that in recent decades, neo-classical realism has emerged as an academic effort, to combine the insights of external and internal factors in this regard. Unlike neoclassical realism or other theoretical perspectives that highlight the importance of individual and domestic level factors, neorealism would appear to offer a

more generalized and bird's eye perspective on foreign policy trends of countries for a given time period. Rather than dealing with a single case, or a very narrowly specified time period, neorealism seems to be a much better indicator in offering mid-to-long term foreign policy trends, predispositions and orientations.

This study considers Turkey as a middle power actor in international politics. This identity is attributed to both Turkey's material power capacity - in comparison to more powerful great powers and less powerful small powers - and Turkey's decades-old geopolitical vision of striking the right balance among the great powers, so that Turkey could follow a multidimensional and multidirectional foreign policy orientation.

That said, the following section discusses the key assumptions of neorealism as they relate to the foreign policy choices of middle powers. Here, the main goal is to demonstrate how the anarchical nature of the international environment, the distribution of material power capacity among states, and their geopolitical locations, act as constraining and enabling factors in foreign policy. Then the attention shifts to a periodical discussion of TFP. The time periods under consideration are as follows: The interwar years and Second World War, the Cold War era, the post-Cold War era between 1991 and 2008, and finally the years since the global financial crisis of 2008. All these time periods evinced different power configurations and systemic features, and Turkey's ability to respond to external developments and craft its own policies have been very much informed by the dynamics of international politics outside of Turkey's borders. The main reason why such a periodization is offered is that the time periods under consideration neatly reflect the changes in balance of power dynamics in international political environment. They have nothing to do in particular with the peculiarities of Turkish foreign policy. Besides, this periodization in no way suggests that this is the most appropriate periodical classification.

## Neorealism and Middle Powers

Neorealism is a theoretical perspective that puts an overwhelming emphasis on the explanatory value of the anarchical international environment in assessing the foreign policy choices of states. Neorealism attributes a degree of explanatory power to how material power in the international system is distributed among states at a given time. Whether the system is unipolar, bipolar or multipolar would have an immense impact on how countries define their international orientation.<sup>1</sup> The distribution of material power capability among states determines the limits of what they could potentially achieve in their foreign policies. Countries, depending on their power capacities, know (should know) how far they could go in terms of their foreign policy ambitions. Countries with different power capabilities would logically end up defining their foreign policy interests differently.

Neorealism values the anarchical structure of international political environment as the main variable affecting how states formulate and implement their foreign policy choices. Yet, the impact of the anarchical environment on states' foreign policies would vary with

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1 Mark V. Kauppi and Paul R. Viotti, *International Relations Theory*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2020, p. 21-61.

states' power capabilities. States with different power capabilities would react to the anarchical structure of international politics differently. Concerns over territorial security/survival, societal cohesion and economic prosperity would increase as states are positioned further down the ladder of power hierarchy.<sup>2</sup>

Ensuring territorial security, and strengthening material power capacity to that end would shape foreign policy priorities of small and middle powers more deeply than it would the great powers, for the destiny of the former would very much depend on the dynamics of the geopolitical competition among the latter. Compared to the great powers, small and middle powers would feel the pressure of 'lack of trust' and 'short shadow of future' problems in anarchical international environments more acutely and deeply. The risk of entrusting their security on the good intentions and security commitments of others would be much higher in the case of small and middle powers than it would be for the great powers. That said, this article finds the key insights of the defensive neorealism of Kenneth Waltz more useful than Mearheimer's offensive realist account.<sup>3</sup>

Geographical location and the psychological attributes of countries constitute a great share of their power capacity, mostly measured in material terms. Of all theoretical accounts, neorealism seem to be most in line with the policy prescriptions of classical geopolitics. Because all states want to survive and grow more powerful than others within the anarchical international environment, their geographical location and psychological attributes caused by their terrain would play decisive roles in this regard. In the case of small and middle powers, their geographical location is a very important force multiplier at their disposal, and they tend to use this as a leverage in their relations with more powerful actors.

Neorealism also suggests that foreign policy is first and foremost very much about how states react to developments taking place outside their borders. Neither the internal characteristics of states nor the individual attributes of their decision makers would have a decisive impact on foreign policy outcomes. Put differently, leaders would view the international environment and the position of their countries within it from the perspective of the state they rule. The 'reason of state' would outweigh the political ideologies of ruling elites, the individual characteristics of decision makers and societal attributes.<sup>4</sup> National interests, defined in terms of material power capabilities, would be the main prism through which leaders would respond to external developments.

Neorealism differs from many other theoretical accounts in terms of the role it assigns to the primacy of the great powers in international politics. Compared to middle powers and small powers, it is the great powers that have the capacity to influence how the international system is structured at a given time and which determine which issues matter in international politics.<sup>5</sup> Unlike lesser powers, the great powers have the luxury of competing with each other

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2 Kjell Inge Bjerga and Torunn Laugen Haaland, "Development of Military Doctrine: The Particular Case of Small States", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 33, No 4, 2010, p. 505-533; James E. Goodby, "The Survival Strategies of Small Nations", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 56, No 5, 2014, p. 31-39.

3 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, California, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.

4 Richard K. Betts, "The Realist Persuasion", *The National Interest*, No 139, 2015, p. 46-55.

5 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2001.

so as to decide how to define the underpinning values and issues of international politics. Based on their interactions with each other, analysts

would be able to assess whether the international system at a given time would be cooperative or conflictual. That said, foreign policy from the perspective of middle and small powers would consist of attempts at adjusting themselves to fit in with the interactions among the great powers. This suggests that international politics in essence consists of the games that the great powers play with each other in terms of shaping the material and normative foundations of the international order at any given time.

Compared to the great powers, lesser powers are more prone to building their foreign policies on the basis of opportunities and limits as offered by the system. They do not have much agency in shaping their foreign policy interests independent of these structural limits and opportunities. This also suggests that the foreign policies of lesser powers are more mechanical and responsive to external factors.<sup>6</sup> The key foreign policy interests of lesser powers are ensuring the continuation of their territorial integrity, societal cohesion and economic prosperity.

Their ability to achieve such interests would vary as to whether the international system is structured around unipolarity, bipolarity or multipolarity. Middle powers are more powerful than small powers, yet their ability to help shape their regional environments in line with their priorities would be very much constrained by the degree to which the great powers are involved in their regions. The existing great powers and other regional middle powers could potentially act as enablers or constrainters.

A unipolar international environment means that there is only one great power within the system, and all other actors try to adjust themselves to the whims, aspirations and policies of that power. To the extent that they develop cooperative and cordial relations with the sole great power, all lesser powers would be able to survive and prosper. Looking from this perspective, the strategy of bandwagoning would remain the only game in town for many lesser powers. The capacity of middle powers to play leadership and hegemonic roles in their region would be very much informed by the degree to which their policies and geopolitical visions align with those of the most powerful actor within the system.<sup>7</sup>

Under bipolarity, the ability of lesser powers to achieve their interests would be very much informed by the dynamics of the geopolitical competition between the two most powerful countries of the system. If there existed a tight bipolarity in the system and the two polar powers were involved in an existential power struggle with each other, the maneuvering capability of lesser powers would diminish decisively. Even though pursuing a balance of power strategy would appear to be the only option facing them, their ability to do so would be quite low. In tight bipolar environments, lesser powers would have difficulty remaining outside the power competition between the most two powerful countries in the system because they would be exposed to pressures to choose sides. Many things would be at stake for them.

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6 Laura Neack, *Studying Foreign Policy Comparatively: Cases and Analysis*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2019, p. 143-149.

7 Hakan Edström and Jacob Westberg, "The Defense Strategies of Middle Powers: Competing for Security, Influence and Status in an Era of Unipolar Demise", *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 39, No 2, 2020, p. 171-190.

However, in loose bipolar environments, their ability to resist external pressure and play one great power off against another would increase. Loose bipolarity might even enable them to have good relations with both great powers.

In multipolar environments, lesser powers would be more able to navigate their own paths. They would be able to juggle among many great powers, and this might allow them to define their foreign policy interests more independently of external constraints. Rather than bandwagoning with one great power at the expense of others, they would be more able to follow multidimensional and multidirectional foreign policies. Even though tight multipolarity would offer them the opportunity to play great powers off against each other, they might be exposed to growing calls to choose sides. Middle powers defined as global swing states would derive the most benefit from such power configurations. All the great powers would compete with each other in pulling such middle powers over to their side. If the international system were based on loose multipolarity, it could/would even be possible that some middle powers might eventually be transformed into great powers some time in the future.<sup>8</sup>

## Neorealism and Turkish Foreign Policy

The Turkish Republic inherited their defensive realpolitik security culture from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>9</sup> Since the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699, the Ottoman Empire had put their concern over maintaining their territorial integrity, and shielding the empire against the territorial encroachments of the imperial powers of Europe at the very center of their foreign policy engagements. This logic had decisively shaped the 'balance of power' practices of the late Ottoman Empire. Whenever the empire had come under the expansionist territorial demands of one particular European power, the Ottoman rulers had tried to do their best to secure the aid of other European powers. The second half of the nineteenth century and the first twenty years of the twentieth century were replete with various attempts of the Ottoman rulers to play the then European great powers off against each other.

Such practices can also be noticed in the foreign policy practices of the Ankara government during the war of independence between 1919 and 1922. Of all these practices, the diplomatic agility of the Ankara government to make use of the geopolitical rivalries among the occupying countries with a view to further driving wedges between them, proved to be decisive in its final victory.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Period Between 1923 and 1945*

The period during the interwar years and the Second World War can be defined as multipolar, given that no single power or pair of powers held sway in international politics overwhelmingly.

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8 Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, Zachary Paikin and David Polansky, *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World*, The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, 2022, <https://peacediplomacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Middle-Powers-in-the-Multipolar-World.pdf>

9 Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, "The Evolution of Turkey's Security Culture", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No 1, 2000, p. 199-217.

10 William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 31-41.

Turkey had the ability to forge closer relations with the great powers of the time simultaneously. For example, while Turkey signed a historic agreement with the Soviet Union in 1925, with a view to buttressing its capacity to stand on more solid ground in its relations with the United Kingdom and France, a treaty of alliance was signed with the United Kingdom and France on the eve of the Second World War, to deal with German demands more convincingly. The fact that power was distributed evenly among the great powers, and all tried to secure Turkey's cooperation in the context of their rivalry with each other, provided Turkish decision makers with immense opportunities to play them all off against each other.<sup>11</sup>

Turkey came out of the war of independence as a new republic, with a keen focus on ensuring its territorial integrity, societal cohesion and economic prosperity. The founders of the Turkish Republic were resolved to set in motion a comprehensive modernization and transformation process at home, and this necessitated the adoption of a vigilant and prudent approach in foreign policy. The motto of 'peace at home and peace in the world' did not suggest a reactionary and passive foreign policy stand. Instead, it was a geopolitical choice, with a view to helping increase Turkey's capacity for resilience, amidst growing internal and external challenges. Turkey's rulers were in need of regional/external stability, in order to focus their attention on the gargantuan transformation process at home. This foreign policy stance also suggested that Turkey acted as a status-quo oriented country, trying to preserve the geopolitical gains of the War of Independence.<sup>12</sup>

Remaining outside geopolitical rivalries among the great powers of the time, and ensuring that external developments did not put Turkey's internal transformation process in jeopardy constituted the key national interests. Rather than adopting an irredentist and expansionist foreign policy attitude, Turkish decision makers had taken the utmost care to make sure that Turkey could preserve the achievements of the Lausanne Peace Treaty of July 1923, which is considered to be the birth certificate of the new Turkish Republic.

Turkey's foreign policy approach during this time period evinces strong similarities with the 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' foreign policy stance of the People's Republic of China since the opening up of the country in the late 1970s, by the time Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. The Chinese rulers were quite aware of the power limitations of their country, and defined continuous economic development as the core Chinese national interest. The key assumption was that contributing to the emergence of a peaceful and stable regional environment in China's neighborhood would enable the Chinese rulers to focus their attention on urgent domestic issues. A status-quo oriented foreign policy would help a lot.<sup>13</sup>

Building closer strategic relations with neighboring countries constituted another feature of Turkish foreign policy during this time period. The signing of the Balkan Pact in 1934 and the Saadabad Pact in 1937 can be seen as Turkey's responses to the worsening security environment in the Balkans and the Middle East during the 1930s. Common threat

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11 Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, p. 41-53.

12 Gürol Baba and Murat Önsoy, "Resilience versus Vulnerability: Turkey's Small Power Diplomacy in the 1930s", *International Politics*, Vol. 58, No 2, 2021, p. 955-975.

13 Barry Buzan, "China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No 1, 2010, p. 5-36.

perceptions among the countries in these regions appear to have brought them closer to each other. For example, both Turkey and Greece were quite alarmed by the irredentist, revisionist and expansionist foreign policies of Bulgaria and Italy.<sup>14</sup> The fact that none of the great powers of the time under consideration were in a position to put their imprint on the geopolitical map decisively, and that power was evenly distributed among them, appear to have enabled lesser powers like Turkey to come up with novel foreign policy initiatives. The multipolar character of the international system enabled Turkey to seek and to build closer strategic cooperation with regional powers.

The adoption of the Montreux Convention in 1936, which bolstered Turkey's sovereign rights in and around the Straits region, and allowed Turkey to oversee the sea traffic through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus more comfortably, and the incorporation of the Hatay region into Turkey's territory in 1938 was all made possible, among other reasons, by the multipolar character of the international system, as well as the need of the great powers to secure Turkey's cooperation on the eve of the Second World War.<sup>15</sup>

Turkey entering into alliance-like relations with the United Kingdom and France on the eve of the Second World War, and simultaneously getting along well with Germany and the Soviet Union, demonstrates that the multipolar international environment improved Turkey's maneuvering capability in foreign policy.

Ankara's adoption of the 'active neutrality' policy during the course of the Second World War was a clear manifestation of how the distribution of power capabilities at the systemic level informed foreign policy behaviors of lesser powers.<sup>16</sup> For example, despite strong German and allied demands that Turkey join the war on their side, the Turkish rulers proved to be successful in keeping Turkey outside the war. Turkey's geopolitical position and geographical location, rather than its material capacity measured in economic and military terms, proved decisive in this context.<sup>17</sup>

### ***The Period Between 1945 and 1991***

The explanatory power of neorealism in making sense of Turkey's foreign policy actions during the Cold War is more convincing than it was in other time periods under consideration. Turkey's decision to apply for membership of NATO in the late 1940s, and then remain within the alliance despite the occasional crises experienced in Turkish-American relations, can be attributed to Turkey's diminishing capability to pursue an 'active neutrality' foreign policy stance, given the tightly held polarization of the international system between the US-led western camp on the one hand, and the Soviet Union-led Eastern camp on the other. Faced with the territorial demands of the post war Soviet leadership on the Straits and eastern Anatolia,

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14 Brock Millman, "Turkish Foreign and Strategic Policy 1934-1942", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31, No 3, 1995, p. 483-508.

15 Dilek Barlas, "Turkish Diplomacy in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. Opportunities and Limits for Middle-power Activism in the 1930s", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 40, No 3, 2005, p. 441-464.

16 Murat Aydođdu, "1939 İngiliz-Fransız-Türk Antlaşması'na Dair Dikkatlerden Kaçan Bir Gerçek: Özel Anlaşma'da Yer Alan 'Erteleyici Madde'nin Kaldırılması", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 19, No 75, 2022, p. 83-100.

17 Selim Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War: An "Active" Neutrality*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Turkey decided to seek security cooperation with the victorious allied powers. Turkey's power capacity was not enough to stave off the Soviet challenge on its own, and therefore allying with the western powers appeared to be the best option available.<sup>18</sup> One should also not underestimate the fact that Turkey's accelerating internal reforms in the image of liberal democracy and free market-oriented capitalism was made possible by Turkey's placement within the western world, following its accession to NATO.

This also suggest that concerns over security have historically driven Turkey's westernization/Europeanization process profoundly, which can potentially be traced back to the early nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Security-driven Europeanization/westernization does not contradict neorealism because, according to neorealism, states would resort to each and every kind of means available to them in order to build up their capacity to survive in the anarchical international environment. Seen from this perspective, if Turkey's western/European identity were to be recognized by western/European nations, this would not only improve Turkey's feeling of security vis-à-vis western/European nations, but also make it easy for western/European nations to come to Turkey's aid whenever the latter felt threatened by non-western/non-European nations.

Despite some resistance within the alliance toward Turkey's NATO membership application, in particular owing to Turkey's national identity and lack of liberal democracy, the growing Soviet expansionism in late 1940s and Turkey's participation in the Korean War on the side of the US-led international collation accelerated the process of Turkey's accession to NATO in 1952.<sup>20</sup>

Turkey's adoption of an overwhelmingly pro-western foreign policy orientation during the 1950s appears to be very much in line with neorealist insights. The tension of the great power confrontation during the 1950s was so high that Turkish leaders seem to have decided to accelerate the pace of the Europeanization/westernization process at home and abroad, in order to ensure western commitment to Turkey's security in the face of the Soviet threat.<sup>21</sup>

The more the international environment was built on tight bipolarity, the more sensitive and emotional the Turkish rulers happened to be in their interactions with external counterparts, in particular with westerners. Any hint that western commitments to Turkey's security were not firm caused Turkish rulers to react to their western counterparts emotionally. This was very much at play in the early 1960s, when Turkish decision makers concluded that westerners had not paid serious consideration to Turkey's security concerns. When the news broke that the Americans had agreed to pull back the Jupiter missiles from Turkey, in return for Russia's withdrawal of ballistic missiles from Cuba, as part of the package deal solution to the Cuban missile crisis, the Turkish leaders reacted harshly, and a debate ensued immediately as to whether Turkey was deriving any benefits from its membership of NATO.<sup>22</sup> A similar situation

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18 Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Turkey's Quest for NATO Membership: The Institutionalization of the Turkish–American Alliance", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 12, No 4, 2012, p. 481-495.

19 Tarık Oğuzlu, "An Analysis of Turkey's Prospective Membership in the European Union from a 'Security' Perspective", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 34, No 3, 2003, p. 285-299.

20 Melvyn P. Leffler, "Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945-1952", *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 71, No 4, 1985, p. 807-825.

21 Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, 1990.

22 Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, p. 98-101.

arose in 1964, when then American President Lyndon Johnson warned his Turkish counterparts that the United States/NATO might not come to Turkey's aid in the event that Turkey's use of US-given weapons in Cyprus triggered a war with the Soviet Union. These two episodes show that Turkey's concerns over its territorial security were quite considerable during the early 1960s, while Turkey's options were quite limited by the tight bipolar environment.

Neorealism also manifested itself in Turkish foreign policy whenever the tensions between the Cold War protagonists lessened. This accounts for the reason why Turkey's relations with the Soviet Union began improving during the period of *détente*. The gradual erosion of western primacy in global politics, and the easing of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1970s contributed to the impression that the world was turning out to be more multipolar than ever. This systemic factor was also decisive in nudging Turkish leaders towards seeking better relations with Middle Eastern countries. It is no coincidence that there was a Middle Eastern direction in Turkish foreign policy during the 1970s, and then Turkish prime minister Bülent Ecevit even argued in the late 1970s that a new international political and economic order should be designed, allowing Turkey to follow a more multidimensional and multidirectional foreign policy orientation.<sup>23</sup> Turkey's opening up to the non-western world was made possible by the lessening of great power tensions in global politics. Turkish leaders felt more comfortable following a multidimensional foreign policy orientation during the 1970s.

It was also during the second half of the 1960s, when the process of *détente* got off the ground, that a fierce debate ensued in Turkey on the merits of remaining within NATO.<sup>24</sup> The ones who argued in favor of Turkey exiting the alliance pointed out that NATO membership was a straitjacket on Turkey, very much constraining Turkey's ability to chart its own way in foreign policy. NATO membership would also antagonize Turkey's relations with the Soviet Union, and put Turkey in danger of unwanted contingencies. Besides, growing reliance on western security protection would likely transform Turkey into a client state, and stymie Turkey's ability to develop its own indigenous military-industrial capability. On the other hand, the ones supporting Turkey's membership of NATO responded to such arguments by pointing out the immense benefits that Turkey was deriving from its western partners. Besides, they underlined that the Cold War tension was still far from ending, and Turkey's ability to resist external challenges to its territorial security was still meager.

Turkey's relations with NATO acquired a growing strategic importance during the 1980s, as the tensions between the Cold War protagonists once again began increasing. The war between Iran and Iraq also worsened Turkey's security concerns. The change of regime in Iran following the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the same year, led Turkish decision makers to rediscover the merits of NATO membership.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, "Threat Perceptions in Southern Europe: The Case of Turkey", Laszlo Valki (ed.), *Changing Threat Perceptions and Military Doctrines*, London, Macmillan Press, 1992, p. 227-237.

24 Tarık Oğuzlu, "NATO ve Türkiye: Dönüşen İttifakın Sorgulayan Üyesi", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 9, No 34, 2012, p. 99-124

25 Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, p. 118-123.

The neorealist logic also manifests itself in the dynamics of Turkish-Greek relations. Turkey's decision to apply for associate membership status in the then European Economic Community in 1959 cannot be convincingly explained should one overlook the fact that Turkey's membership application followed that of Greece. Besides, these two countries vied with each other within NATO in order to secure the maximum degree of NATO support for their national causes.<sup>26</sup> The reason why Greece decided to exit NATO's military wing in 1975 was that neither the United States nor NATO had prevented Turkey from undertaking a military operation in Cyprus. In Greek eyes, NATO was predisposed to Turkey, because of Turkey's geographical location and material power capability.<sup>27</sup> This also accounts for why Greece wanted to join the European Union (EU). Membership of the EU has been primarily seen by Greece as a security strategy, allowing Greece to counterbalance Turkey in and around the Eastern Mediterranean region.<sup>28</sup>

Assessing the degree to which systemic factors affected Turkey's foreign policy choices during the Cold War is worth discussing for another reason. During this time period, individual and state-societal level factors had most of the time suggested that Turkey would do well to adopt a more critical attitude toward the West in general and NATO in particular. The growing polarization in Turkish politics along ideological fault lines during the 1960s and 1970s allowed anti-western and anti-NATO voices to be heard more frequently and loudly than ever. Far right nationalist and Islamist parties questioned Turkey's membership process with the European Union, by underlining inherent cultural, religious and traditional differences between the parties, and suggested that Turkey had better pursue a foreign policy orientation aimed at helping the Islamic and Turkic world under Turkey's leadership. Criticisms of the West also increased spectacularly following the United States Congress's decision to put heavy economic and military embargos on Turkey, in response to Turkey's military operation in Cyprus.<sup>29</sup> Yet, in the final analysis, the imperatives of geopolitics dictated Turkey's pro-western/pro-NATO stance.

### ***The Period Between 1991 and 2008***

The first two decades of the post-Cold War era is defined by many scholars as a unipolar era, overwhelmingly reflecting the geopolitical priorities of the United States. Not only was the power distribution between the United States and other great powers very much skewed in the American's favor, but also core American/western values shaped the normative basis of international politics decisively. Had the US-led western international community not won the Cold War against the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama would probably not have argued that the dissolution of the communist block suggested "the end of history".<sup>30</sup> It was under Pax

26 Ronald Krebs, "Perverse Institutionalism: NATO and the Greco-Turkish Conflict," *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No 2, 1999, p. 343-377.

27 David Binder, "Greece, Turkey, and NATO", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No 2, 2012, p. 95-106.

28 Thanos Dakos, "Greek Security Policy in the Twenty-First Century", Panayotis J. Tsakonas and Aristide D. Caratzos (eds.), *Greece and Turkey After the End of the Cold War*, New York, Christodoulos K. Yiallourides Publications, 2001, p. 81-99.

29 Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, p. 107-118.

30 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, New York, The Free Press, 1992.

Americana that the liberal international order began enlarging toward non-western geographies. The assumption that liberal democracy and free-market oriented capitalism would profoundly shape the modernization and development processes all over the world was made possible by the sheer material power capacity at the disposal of the United States.

Unlike the Russian revisionism and Chinese assertiveness of the last decade, the 1990s were years of full confidence on the part of the western powers that Russia and China would soon become responsible stakeholders in the liberal international order. It was even argued that Russia would one day join the EU and NATO. The adoption of a liberal-integrationist approach by the United States toward these two countries also suggested that these two non-western great powers were years away from appearing on America's radar as geopolitical rivals and peer competitors.<sup>31</sup> Besides, the EU was at the height of its power, radiating its norms and values to the former communist countries of central and eastern Europe. The interstate practices inside the EU were thought of as inspiring other countries across the globe in terms of how to successfully achieve physical security, material prosperity and societal cohesion.

It is against such a background that TFP remained predominantly pro-western and pro-European during much of this time period. Not only did Turkey intensify its efforts to join the EU as a full member and support NATO's transformation process, but also many of Turkey's foreign policy choices were in accordance with key western/American/European priorities.

Even though the end of the Cold War had relieved Turkey of the Soviet threat to the north and Turkey's maneuvering capability in its neighborhood appeared to have increased, this did not lead Turkish decision makers to prioritize the concept of 'strategic autonomy' in Turkish foreign policy. In the early years of the 1990s, the Turkish rulers assumed that the dissolution of the Soviet Union would allow Turkey to play a strong leadership role in its environment. Turkey's growing capability of maneuver in the absence of the Soviet threat would likely pave the way for the strengthening of Turkey's geopolitical influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>32</sup> However, it soon became clear that Turkey's material power capacity on the one hand, and deteriorating domestic environment on the other, would not facilitate such a process.

That is why Turkish decision makers soon began thinking up new ways of bolstering Turkey's importance in western eyes. The idea that Turkey could potentially act as a bridge connecting the western world to non-western locations gained salience over time. The specter of Turkey no longer being considered as a western/European country with the conclusion of the common Soviet threat seems to have galvanized many of Turkey's foreign policy initiatives.<sup>33</sup> Turkey was frequently mentioned in western circles as an ideal role model for the newly independent states in the post-Soviet geography and the Balkans, in their efforts to become prosperous, powerful and secure.

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31 Thomas Graham and Dmitri Trenin, "Towards a New Model for US– Russian Relations", *Survival*, Vol. 62, No 4, 2020, p. 119-134; Evan S. Medeiros, "The Changing Fundamentals of US-China Relations", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No 3, 2019, p. 93-119.

32 Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, p. 135-157.

33 İpek Ruacan, "A Study in State Socialization: Turkey's EU Accession and CFSP", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 7, No 4, 2007, p. 573-590.

Turkey had the golden years of its relations with Israel during the 1990s, and the rapprochement between these two countries was very much supported by the United States. These two countries shared similar threat perceptions, and strong ideational and institutional links to the western world.<sup>34</sup>

Concerning the dynamics of the Turkish-American relations, the two countries defined their relations as a strategic partnership. Then American President Bill Clinton visited Turkey in 1999, and the United States actively lobbied the European Union members on behalf of Turkey's EU membership candidacy status.<sup>35</sup> Turkey also continued to value its membership of NATO, and supported NATO's post-Cold War era transformation decisively. Turkish troops joined many multilateral military operations undertaken by NATO in war-torn countries, and Turkey supported NATO's expansion into former communist countries of central and eastern Europe.<sup>36</sup>

Turkey and the EU signed the Customs Union agreement in 1995, and Turkey was declared a candidate for membership in December 1999. Despite the occasional outburst of anti-Turkey sentiments across Europe, Turkey's resolve to join the EU continued. The years between 1999 and 2005 are seen as the golden age of Turkey's European mission, in which successive Turkish governments adopted comprehensive reform packages as part of Turkey's efforts to fulfil the accession criteria. Accession talks with Turkey officially began in October 2005. It is also worth mentioning that scholarly interest in Turkey-EU relations in general, and different dimensions of Turkey's Europeanization process in particular, spiked during the unipolar era of 1991-2008.<sup>37</sup>

Turkey's foreign policy continued to be very much pro-western and pro-European during the first decade of the twenty-first century under the reign of successive Justice and Development Party (JDP)-led governments.<sup>38</sup> This was so, not only because strengthening liberal democratic practices at home would suit the political interests of the ruling JDP – an internal motivation - but also because the primacy of the western powers in global politics was still unrivalled.<sup>39</sup> The European Union had its strongest power of attraction in the eyes of the countries lying at its peripheries, and the United States had such an immense power capacity at its disposal that it did not hesitate to use it to topple regimes in far distant places and engage in nation-building exercises abroad. Even though the September 11 attack dented the American image, the power gap between the West and the rest was still in favor of the former.

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34 Tarık Oğuzlu, "The Changing Dynamics of Turkey-Israel Relations: A Structural Realist Account", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No 3, 2010, p. 273-288.

35 Tarık Oğuzlu and Mustafa Kibaroğlu, "Testing the Strength of Turkish-American Strategic Relationship through NATO: Convergence or Divergence within the Alliance?", *The Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 15, No 2, 2013, p. 207-222.

36 Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkey's Eroding Commitment to NATO: From Identity to Interests", *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No 3, 2012, p. 153-164.

37 Meltem Müftüler-Baç and Yaprak Gürsoy, "Is There a Europeanization of Turkish Foreign Policy? An Addendum to the Literature on EU Candidates", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 11, No 3, 2010, p. 405-427.

38 Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkey and Europeanization of Foreign Policy" *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 125, No 4, 2010-2011, p. 657-683.

39 Tarık Oğuzlu and Burak Bilgehan Özpek, "Turkey's Europeanization," *International Journal*, Vol. 63, No 4, 2008, p. 991-1009.

Many scholars defined Turkish foreign policy during the first decade of the twenty-first century as a successful example of Europeanization.<sup>40</sup> This manifested itself in three ways. Europeanization can first be observed in the realm of the decision-making process. Alongside the reforms undertaken as part of the harmonization packages, elected civilians acquired more influence than appointed bureaucrats in determining Turkish national interests and foreign policy priorities.

Second, in terms of the foreign policy instruments adopted, Turkey acted very much in a European way. Turkey adopted diplomatic initiatives to help facilitate solutions to regional conflicts in the wider Middle East, encouraged the actors in its neighborhood to intensify economic interdependency among themselves, and put soft and civilian power practices very much at the center of its engagements with regional actors. Enabling visa free cross-border visits, convening high-level strategic dialogue meetings with regional countries and contributing to the strengthening of Kantian dynamics region-wise were very much European in essence. The so-called 'zero-problems with neighbors' foreign policy was very much in line with the Kantian security practices across Europe.

Third, the substance of many of Turkey's foreign policy choices during this period overwhelmingly accorded with western priorities. For example, Turkey supported the resolution of the Cyprus dispute within the framework of the Annan Plan, took part in the US-led Middle Eastern Initiative, aimed at strengthening liberal representative democracy in the region, 'de-securitized' its extensively 'securitized' relations with neighboring countries, initiated an opening process toward improving relations with the Republic of Armenia, played a mediator's role between Israel and Syria, and contributed to the resolution of the nuclear dispute between Iran and the international community by undertaking a joint initiative with Brazil.<sup>41</sup>

Even though Turkish-American relations experienced difficult times in the context of American efforts to topple the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and bolster Iraqi Kurds in northern Iraq, Turkey's value in American eyes increased in the post 9/11 era. Being a predominantly Muslim nation with liberal democratic practices at home, Turkey was considered to be vital in the context of the global war on terror.<sup>42</sup>

### ***The Period Between 2008 and 2022***

The dynamics of the international system seems to have changed profoundly, following the onset of the global financial crisis in late 2008, as the rising non-western powers have increasingly become more powerful in global politics compared to the traditional western powers. The consensus among international relations academics is that the world has become more multi-polar over the last fifteen years, as western powers have begun experiencing

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40 Kivanç Ulusoy, "The Europeanization of Turkey and its Impact on the Cyprus Problem," *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 10, No 3, 2008, p. 309-329

41 Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkey and the European Union: Europeanization without membership," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 13, No 2, 2012, p. 229-243.

42 Mustafa Kibaroglu and Selim C. Sazak, "Business as Usual: The U.S.-Turkey Security Partnership", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No 4, 2015, p. 98-112.

serious internal problems, while the rise of China, Russia and the larger global south has made the allure of illiberal authoritarianism more popular all around the world.<sup>43</sup> Not only have the material foundations of western primacy been eroded, but also the normative underpinnings of the liberal international order have come under strong challenges with the growing appeal of the Chinese method of development and political practices.

The most important indication of the gradual shift in global power from the Euro-Atlantic world to the Pacific world is the Indo-Pacific turn in US foreign policy. Starting with the Obama administration and then continuing with the Trump and Biden administrations, the United States has begun shifting its geopolitical focus away from Europe and the Middle East to East Asia.<sup>44</sup> The successive American administrations over the last decade have gradually tried to disentangle the United States from the European and Middle Eastern geopolitical theaters, while beginning to spend much more time and effort on containing China's spectacular rise in global politics.

Such shifts in the fabric of the international order seem to have encouraged many lesser powers, like Turkey, to play a more assertive role in their neighborhood. Even though one can convincingly explain Turkey's growing involvement in Middle Eastern problems and continuing efforts to steer the course of the developments in the region in its favor by making direct reference to Turkey's internal politics, such as the growing level of self-confidence on the part of Turkey's rulers following the third electoral victory of the JDP in Turkey's parliamentary elections held in the summer of 2011, one would nonetheless do well to underline the fact that Turkey's growing activism in the region has been made possible by the emerging regional dynamics in the post-Arab Spring Middle East.<sup>45</sup>

Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated opposition groups across the region, the growing determination of the Turkish rulers to midwife a new regional order in the region, reflecting Turkey's neo-Ottomanist aspirations, and the country's decision to get militarily involved in many regional crises, appear to have been facilitated by the emerging multipolarity at systemic and regional levels.<sup>46</sup>

The time period since the onset of the Arab Spring can in fact be divided into two, in which Turkey's foreign policy practices evolved differently. From 2011 till the end of 2015, regional order in the Middle East was a loose multipolarity in which Turkey's maneuvering capability was relatively high. The United States was quite reluctant to get involved in the crises across the region, in particular that in Syria, and the Obama administration was strategically disoriented. Russia, Iran and other regional actors were also quite reluctant to take firm positions on various crises, and basically hoping that the tumultuous developments taking place in the region did not affect their politics negatively.

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43 Tanja A. Börzel and Michael Zürn, "Contestations of the Liberal International Order: From Liberal Multilateralism to Postnational Liberalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No 2, 2021, p. 282–305.

44 Hugo Meijer and Luis Simón, "Covert Balancing: Great Powers, Secondary States and US Balancing Strategies against China," *International Affairs*, Vol. 97, No 2, 2021, p. 463-481.

45 Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy at the Nexus of Changing International and Regional Dynamics," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 17, No 1, 2016, p. 58-67.

46 Beatrix Futák-Campbell and Hylke de Sauvage Nolting, "Turkey as Normative Power: Connections with the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring," *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 19, No 74, 2022, p. 3-19

During this period, Turkey's support for opposition movements affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood was solid, and Turkish leaders did not hesitate to put an ideology driven attitude at the center of Turkey's regional engagement. Giving value to the principle of 'precious loneliness', no matter how risky it would be in terms of the consequences it might inflict on Turkey, carried the day most of the time. Turkish rulers even dared taking the risk of Turkey's gradual isolation. The assumptions that Turkey was on the right side of history and that time was on Turkey's side seem to have prevented the Turkish rulers from recognizing the gap between Turkey's expectations/aspirations and its capabilities.<sup>47</sup>

Since Russia got militarily involved in the Syrian civil war in late 2015, we have fast moved to a tight multipolarity in the Middle East. Iran has also intensified its efforts to support the incumbent Assad regime in Damascus. On the other hand, the United States has organized an international coalition with the sole mission of quashing the ISIS threat in Iraq and Syria. Hence, allowing for a further American presence in Syria and Iraq. Across the region, a geopolitical rivalry has intensified between the Sunni monarchies in the Gulf region on the one hand, and Iran and its proxies on the other. Israeli involvement in the Syrian war, and growing strategic rapprochement between Israel and the Sunni monarchies, in particular the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, have fueled regional polarizations. It has become increasingly difficult for Turkey to steer the course of developments in the region to its liking since late 2015. Turkey's growing relationship with Qatar has not resulted in positive achievements either. Instead, an increasing number of countries in the region has defined the emerging Turkish-Qatari relationship as a new power block, bearing overwhelming responsibility for many things that went wrong in the region.<sup>48</sup>

Since 2015, Turkey has had to gradually shift from an assertive and transformational foreign policy stance to a more prudent and defensive one, prioritizing defending its territorial borders as well as lessening its isolation. The gap between Turkey's expectations and capabilities has finally been recognized by the Turkish leaders, and this has set in motion more realist than ideational foreign policy undertakings.<sup>49</sup>

For example, Turkey has not only intensified its strategic cooperation with Russia, but also invested in the so-called Astana Process, with a view to maintaining its capability to achieve its goals in northern Syria. The need to rely on cooperation with other actors and strike the right balance between different power centers have very much shaped Turkey's foreign policy engagements since late 2015.

The realist-turn in Turkish foreign policy has become more conspicuous lately, as Turkey's attempts at mending fences with erstwhile enemies and competitors have increased. Overtures to Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are noteworthy in this regard.<sup>50</sup> This article does not argue that Turkey's worsening economic crisis and the political

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47 Jeremy Salt, "Turkey and Syria: When 'Soft Power Turned Hard'", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 25, No 3, 2018, p. 80-96.

48 Christopher Phillips, "Eyes Bigger Than Stomachs: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Syria", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 24, No 1, 2017, p. 36-47.

49 Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order", *All Azimuth*, Vol. 9, No 1, 2020, p. 127-139.

50 Eren Alper Yılmaz, "Turkish Foreign Policy in a Neorealist Framework: Bilateral Relations since 2016", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 28, No 3-4, 2021, p. 144-158.

concerns of the ruling elites have not played roles in such realist turnabouts. Instead, the point is that the changing dynamics of security orders at systemic and regional levels have very much shaped the limits of what Turkey could achieve abroad. At a time of growing tight multipolarity at systemic and regional levels, concerns over territorial security have increased, and this has pushed Turkey into an increasing reliance on military power instruments.<sup>51</sup> Hence, Turkey's numerous military operations in northern Syria. Rather than seeking regional leadership at all costs, Turkey's efforts to prevent external developments from affecting domestic stability have intensified. A growing reliance on military tools in regional crises reflects a realpolitik mentality that the best defense would begin abroad.<sup>52</sup>

Another issue demonstrating the growing impact of external factors on TFP behavior is the war in Ukraine and the concomitant polarization in great power politics in recent years. Being a middle power, Turkey's ability to pursue multidimensional and multidirectional foreign policies is very much informed by how tense relations among the great powers are. Of all the configurations of polarity, it is loose multipolarity that would accord middle powers like Turkey the highest degree of maneuverability in their foreign policy. That has been roughly the case during the first half of the third decade of the twenty-first century.

However, tensions among the great powers have lately increased, and the Turkish leaders have become aware of the limitations that this has begun producing on Turkish foreign policy. As a new Cold War-like environment has begun emerging between the West and Russia, the western powers have intensified their criticisms of Turkey's coming closer to Russia lately. Turkey's acquisition of S-400 missiles from Russia led the United States to downgrade its strategic cooperation with Turkey, and Ankara was excluded from the F-35 projects.<sup>53</sup>

Turkey's bringing its national priorities and sensitivities to the NATO agenda following the membership application of Finland and Sweden has irked NATO's other allies, in particular the United States, which considers the membership of these two Nordic countries in NATO vital to its efforts to defeat Russian expansionism and aggression.

Even though Turkey's swing state identity can be seen as a force multiplier in its relations with global heavyweights, Turkey's ability to sit on the fence in the emerging new Cold War, and getting along well with all the great powers simultaneously has decreased (and will likely decrease further) as the international system is fast moving from loose multipolarity to tight multipolarity (even tight bipolarity). Turkey might be exposed to growing calls from global competitors to choose sides.

## Conclusion

This article has underlined the role of systemic and external factors in Turkish foreign policy from the perspective of neorealism. Depending on the nature of the external environment at

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51 Hakan Mehmetçik, "The Militarization of Turkish Foreign Policy", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2022, p. 24-41.

52 H. Tarık Oğuzlu, "Turkey as a Restrained Middle Power", *Turkish Studies*, 2023, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2023.2171870

53 Sinan Ülgen, "Redefining the U.S.-Turkey Relationship", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/07/26/redefining-u.s.-turkey-relationship-pub-85016> (Accessed 12 May 2022)

systemic and regional levels, whether it is cooperative or conflictual, or whether it is based on unipolarity, bipolarity or multipolarity, Turkey's ability to define its foreign policy interests from a narrower or wider perspective has varied. Turkey's maneuvering capability in its foreign policy has been decisively shaped by whether the external environment was permissive or constraining. This does not however deny the importance of internal and individual level factors in making sense of Turkey's foreign policy undertakings since the early 1920s. This article has not aimed at proving the much superior explanatory power of systemic factors on Turkey's foreign policy, at the expense of unit-level and domestic factors. The goal has rather been to modestly demonstrate the impact of changing power dynamics at the systemic level on Turkey's foreign policy trends and orientations in a periodical ordering. In doing so, the key theoretical focus has been on Waltzian defensive neorealism.

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