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Insulator, Player, Or Assertive Insulator? Reassessing Türkiye's Role in The Eastern Mediterranean
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Tuğçe ERSOY CEYLAN





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Değerlendirilmek üzere dergimize gönderilen çalışmaların, daha önce yayımlanmamış, yayımlanmak üzere kabul edilmemiş ve yayımlanmak için değerlendirilme sürecinde olmaması gerekir. Değerlendirme sürecinde olan ve yayımlanan eserlerin sorumluluğu tümüyle yazar(lara) aittir. Sayılarımız elektronik olarak yayımlanır. Yayımlanan eserlerin telif hakları Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Diplomasi Dergisi'ne aittir. Yayımlanması istenilen çalışmalar dergi yazım kuralları ve yayın ilkelerinde belirtilen koşullara uygun şekilde hazırlanıp gönderilmelidir. Dergiye sunulan makaleler öncelikle şekil ve içerik yönünden ön inceleme tabi tutulmaktadır. Şekil ve içerik olarak uygun bulunan makaleler hakem tayin edilmek üzere yayın kuruluna sunulmaktadır. Değerlendirme sürecine geçildikten sonra hakemlik süreci ortalama 3 ile 5 hafta arası sürmektedir. Yayın Kurulu tarafından incelenen makaleler uygun bulunduğu takdirde en az iki hakem atanmaktadır. Hakemlerden gelen rapor çerçevesinde yazar(lar)dan düzeltme, ek bilgi ve kısaltma istenmesine veya yayımlanmasına karar verilmektedir. Hakemlerden bir olumlu ve bir olumsuz rapor verilmesi halinde ilgili çalışma Dergi Editörlüğü tarafından uygun görülmesi halinde üçüncü bir hakeme de gönderilmektedir.



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INSULATOR, PLAYER, OR ASSERTIVE INSULATOR?

REASSESSING TÜRKİYE’S ROLE IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Tuğçe ERSOY CEYLAN* 

ABSTRACT

This study reassesses Türkiye’s evolving position in the Eastern Mediterranean through the lens of the Regional Security Complex Theory. While Türkiye has long been categorized as an insulator state—situated at the intersection of multiple regional security complexes without full integration into any—recent shifts in foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party reflect an assertive attempt to transcend this structural marginality. Against this backdrop, the study introduces the concept of an assertive insulator, a state that actively seeks regional influence but remains constrained by systemic and geopolitical realities. Through an in-depth analysis of Türkiye’s energy politics, regional alignments, and strategic behavior, the paper demonstrates that Türkiye’s foreign policy activism has not yielded full inclusion in emerging regional configurations. Instead, it has reinforced its liminal status. The findings thus not only reaffirm the explanatory power of RSCT but also call for a conceptual refinement to better account for hybrid and transitional actor roles in regional security dynamics.

Keywords: *Regional Security Complex Theory, Assertive Insulator, Turkish Foreign Policy, Eastern Mediterranean, Energy Politics*

Jel Kodes: *F51, F52, F59, Q40*

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YALITKAN, AKTÖR YA DA ATILGAN YALITKAN?

TÜRKİYE’NİN DOĞU AKDENİZ’DEKİ ROLÜNÜ YENİDEN DEĞERLENDİRMEK

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Türkiye’nin Doğu Akdeniz’deki değişen konumunu Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi çerçevesinde yeniden değerlendirmektedir. Türkiye, uzun yıllar boyunca farklı bölgesel güvenlik komplekslerinin kesişiminde yer alıp hiçbirine tam olarak entegre olmayan bir “yalıtkan ülke” olarak sınıflandırılmıştır. Ancak Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi döneminde dış politikada yaşanan dönüşüm, bu yapısal dışlanmışlığın aşılmasına yönelik atılğan bir çabayı ortaya koymuştur. Bu bağlamda çalışma, mevcut teorik tipolojilerin ötesine geçerek “atılğan yalıtkan” kavramını önermektedir. Bu kavram, bölgesel etki kurma arzusuyla hareket eden ancak sistemsal ve jeopolitik kısıtlar nedeniyle merkezî aktörlüğe ulaşamayan devletleri tanımlamak üzere geliştirilmiştir. Türkiye’nin enerji politikası, bölgesel ittifaklar ve stratejik davranışları üzerine yapılan derinlemesine analiz, bu dış politika aktivizminin beklenen bütünleşmeyi sağlayamadığını; aksine, Türkiye’nin geçişken ve belirsiz bir konumda sıkıştığını ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak çalışma, Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisinin açıklayıcılığını teyit etmekle kalmamakta, aynı zamanda geçiş halinde olan melez aktörlerin analizine imkân tanıyacak kavramsal bir açılım da önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi, Türkiye, Atılğan Yalıtkan, Dış Politika, Doğu Akdeniz, Enerji Politikaları

Jel Kodu: F51, F52, F59, Q40

1. INTRODUCTION

Türkiye’s Eastern Mediterranean policy has recently become the focal point of international politics with its complex relations with neighboring countries and the dynamics developing in this direction. Having a strategic location at the intersection of Europe and Asia has made Türkiye one of the key countries in the region. For this reason, Türkiye’s foreign policy regarding the region can create significant results and impacts in a very wide geopolitical area.

Since the hydrocarbon discoveries, the Eastern Mediterranean has become a region of increasing importance for the countries both within and outside the region. The massive exploration of energy resources, particularly the natural gas has made the region reserving the world’s most important sources of natural gas. Given the significance of this exploration of energy resource which is proved to be crucial for the conduct of energy policies of the states, one might argue that the hydrocarbon discoveries have

become a shaping factor for regional security and stability since for a safe transfer of energy, there is a need for a secure environment. However, on the other hand this massive energy resource has proven to be a catalyst in the increase of tensions between the regions of the countries.

In addition to the ongoing issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Cyprus problem, the arising tensions resulting from natural gas discoveries has made the region more heated over the past years. Likewise, the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, the emergence of ISIL, the deterioration of Israeli-Turkish relations has complicated the inter-state relations at the regional level. As a result, the gas reserves have been securitized among the states of the region. Each state along with the global powers such as United States (US), European Union (EU), and Russia began to determine their policy aims and construct their foreign policy strategies vis-à-vis each other.

As well as the other states of the region, the Eastern Mediterranean has become an increasingly important focus for Türkiye's foreign and security policy in the recent years. Along with the old problems, the emergence of new issues related to the energy and sovereignty rights in the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) have grown into significant challenges for Türkiye. Likewise, Türkiye is facing a quasi-alliance between Israel, Greece and Cyprus that is backed by the EU (Ersoy, 2019). As a result of its problematic relations with these countries, Türkiye is not part of this new regional cooperation. Hence, Ankara is in struggle with this quasi-alliance over the right to explore the offshore hydrocarbon resources of this region.

This study argues that Türkiye's isolated and problematic position in the region might be the outcome of the redefinition of Turkish foreign policy under Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and ideology. In recent years Türkiye has begun to pursue a more active policy on the international stage, sought to diversify its relations and displayed its intention of becoming a player especially at the regional level. This shift in Türkiye's foreign and security policy is the result of an ambition to become a regional great power in the near future. Whereas the Copenhagen School's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) designates Türkiye as an insulator state sitting at the intersection of different security complexes without truly being part of any of them. Therefore, there occurs a contrast between Türkiye's vision to become a great power and RSCT's positioning of Türkiye as an insulator state since according to the theory being an insulator and a great power is improbable. Thus, Türkiye's role becomes ambiguous. This ambiguity lies within the change in Turkish foreign policy; its redefinition as proactive and in the rhetoric adopted by the AKP government displayed as the will to be a regional player.

In light of this background, this study aims to re-position Türkiye within the regional security complex framework developed by the Copenhagen School. Therefore, it critically re-examines Türkiye's role in the Eastern Mediterranean by moving beyond the conventional binary of *insulator*

versus *regional player*. It introduces the concept of an *assertive insulator* to better capture Türkiye's liminal and contested position that is marked by ambitious foreign policy initiatives that are often constrained by the structural logics of the Regional Security Complex Theory. To better understand how Türkiye's aspirations to become an influential regional power shape its foreign policy strategy, the ideological and strategic shifts in Turkish foreign policy will be examined. Subsequently, Türkiye's attitudes and strategies regarding challenges and issues in the Eastern Mediterranean will be analysed to provide insights into its evolving foreign and security policies. Ultimately, this study seeks to determine whether the shift in Turkish foreign policy strategy has facilitated the country's emergence as a regional power or if it represents a miscalculated step that has instead confined Türkiye to the position of an *assertive insulator* - a state trapped between ambition and structural constraint.

2. TÜRKİYE'S ROLE IN REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY: INSULATOR OR REGIONAL ACTOR?

First introduced by Barry Buzan in 1983, the regional security complex is defined as “the group of states whose fundamental security concerns are close and whose national securities are interrelated” (Buzan, 1983:106). The definition was then widened by Buzan and Waever (2003) and non-state actors and the other security sectors were included along with the military sector. This widened definition of the regional security complex theory included “a set of units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another” (Buzan and Waever, 2003).

According to RSCT, regional security dynamics are based on power relations and patterns of amity and enmity. Hence the powers that do not confront directly with each other might take part in the same network of relations. RSCT defines the powers according to their capacities and their positions at the systemic level; so, there are super, great and regional powers. Superpower states are the ones which reach global levels in terms of military and economic capacities, and they are involved in processes of de-securitization in almost all regions of the world, whether as threats, guarantors, allies, or interveners. They need to see themselves, and be accepted by others in rhetoric and behavior, as having this rank. United States is the only superpower in the current international system. Great powers are the states which need not to project power in all regions of the world. What distinguishes great powers from merely regional ones is that they are responded to by others on the basis of system level calculations about the present and near-future distribution of power (Buzan and Waever, 2003: 34-35). Russia, China, Japan and the EU keep the great power status. Regional powers are those states that define the polarity of any given regional security complex, such as Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Syria in the multipolar Middle Eastern regional security complex (RSC). Their capabilities loom large in their regions, but do not register much in a broad-spectrum way at the global level (Buzan and Waever, 2003: 37).

As a matter of fact, Turkish foreign policy designated as “peace at home, peace in the world” from 1923 onwards has been compatible with the RSCT’s positioning Türkiye as an insulator. According to RSCT’s dynamics of the regional context, Türkiye stands as an insulator; “a location occupied by one or more units where larger security dynamics stand back-to-back” (Buzan and Waever, 2003: 43). Accordingly, Türkiye sits at the margins of three regional security complexes: the EU, the Middle East and ex-Soviet (Kazan, 2005: 290). Türkiye participates in all three from a position of an outsider. Despite being a relevant geopolitical actor, Türkiye’s not being more present in security dynamics of its neighbors which was in line with its foreign policy doctrine “peace at home, peace in the world” has helped Copenhagen School to explain its position as an insulator since Türkiye did not belong to any regional security complex; that is, did not intensify security relations (either enmity or amity) with one of the RSC’s around its borders (Barrinha, 2014: 166).

Nevertheless, Buzan and Waever acknowledge Türkiye as a special kind of insulator since it is very active in the surrounding RSC’s although according to their theory an insulator usually plays a passive role. Yet, they do emphasize that “Türkiye is not able to bring different RSC’s together, to make them from one coherent strategic arena, of which it is part” (Buzan and Waever, 2003: 485). As insulators are placed outside the RSC’s power equations, the theory argues that for an insulator to become a great power, it would have to first become a regional power within an RSC.

While Buzan and Wæver acknowledge Türkiye as a “special kind of insulator” due to its active engagement with neighboring regional security complexes, the Turkish case arguably necessitates a more refined conceptual category. The trajectory of Türkiye’s foreign policy which is marked by assertive attempts to transcend its insulator role and become a regional player, illustrates the limitations of the static typologies offered by RSCT. This study proposes the notion of an “*assertive insulator*”, a state that actively aspires to reshape its regional security positioning but remains structurally constrained by the logic of complex boundaries, shifting alliances, and systemic inertia. Such a category captures Türkiye’s hybrid position as a liminal actor oscillating between marginality and centrality, thus offering a more dynamic understanding of insulator roles within regional security complexes.

3. REDEFINITION OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: FROM RESTRAINT TO PROACTIVE STANCE

From the establishment of Turkish Republic in 1923 until the end of the Cold War at the beginning of 1990s, Turkish foreign policy has been marked by restraint followed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s principle “peace at home, peace in the world”. This strategy was based on the fulfilment of common goals and policies with neighboring countries without compromising Türkiye’s independence and sovereignty (Barrinha, 2014). The message given to the international community via this foreign policy doctrine was that Türkiye did not have any revisionist demand after independence and not any intention

to intervene beyond its borders. Thus, Türkiye guaranteed to exist without involving any conflict situation except for any violation regarding its borders (Oran, 2011: 47). So, one pillar of the Turkish foreign policy has been supporting the status quo. This restrained stance had its own logic since Türkiye embarked on the nation-building project inside and had no time or interest to develop relations with other countries. This led Türkiye to ensure and maintain the balance of power within the established order: due to its geostrategic position, balancing between the West and its opponents and balancing among the units in the West.

Another pillar of Turkish foreign policy was Occidentalism. Occidentalism has historical, ideological, sociological and cultural dimensions in Turkish-Ottoman history. The West has always been the direction of territorial expansion, the direction into which the intellectuals have faced and the only development model when Turkish Republic was established. Hence, the Western ideology and institutions have been adopted both as infrastructure and superstructure. As for the foreign policy strategy, Occidentalism has been deemed as the only option with no alternative. Occidentalism has so penetrated in Turkish foreign policy that when AKP administration would set sail for a new foreign strategy which embark on establishing a sphere of influence in the former Ottoman territories, the criticisms would have aroused indicating that this signified a serious change of paradigm, a shift of axis.

Owing to the policy of restraint and the strategy of balancing among the Western countries, Türkiye was able to sit at the margins of Second World War. Türkiye stayed non-belligerent during the war. Following the end of the Second World War, the international system became bipolar, dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR). In this bipolar structure, Türkiye positioned itself on the Western camp – in line with traditional doctrine - against the threat of communism and aligned its international security concerns with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Nevertheless, this membership did not culminate with Türkiye's more active presence on the international stage (Barrinha, 2014: 171).

Türkiye has pursued its position as the supporter of the status quo and kept its policy of restraint during Cold War. It was only under Menderes government that Türkiye departed from the traditional foreign policy, sought to conduct a more active foreign policy which carried a lot of risks. In that sense, Menderes period seems to be the antecedent of the foreign policy vision under Özal government (1983-1989) which would be introduced, in the coming years, as active foreign policy instead of self-restraint (Oran, 2011: 498). This marks as well, although to a lesser extent, a deviation from Türkiye's role as an insulator since according to RSCT an insulator is deemed relatively passive actor in regional politics. Hence, due to its policy of restraint and of safeguarding the status quo, Türkiye has played well its role of insulator between multiple regional security complexes and did not enter in-depth security relations which is necessary to become a player.

Yet, following the end of the Cold War, there occurred a revival of Turkish interest in the Balkans and Caucasian states during their disintegration from the Soviet Union. Türkiye's new foreign policy strategy vis-à-vis these regions was designed to make it a regional actor, rather than an insulator, tasked with warding off the imminent Soviet threat (Ekinci, 2010). This new strategy introduced as active foreign policy under Özal presidency displayed a will to a role change of Türkiye's position within the international political and security spheres. However, this shift has been possible as far as it was congenial to the new setting of international system. Hence, a new Turkish-US cooperation in these regions was the catalyst of this new foreign policy vision. But this new strategy represented neither a serious deviation from the traditional foreign policy doctrine nor a change of ideology; it was rather an attempt to balance self-restraint and activism. Türkiye responded to the emerging post-Cold War order that it would pursue a more active role in the surrounding regions – the Balkans, Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Turgut Özal was the mastermind of this new strategy at the core of which lied the belief that Türkiye could maintain its position of a valued ally of the West by augmenting its regional role and influence (Sayarı, 1997: 45). Türkiye has pursued a more active policy in the Middle East as well: engaging in the Gulf War and developing open ties with Israel in the 1990s (Ersoy-Ceylan, 2021).

Although the change of strategy was meant to be a role changer, that was not actually the case. Türkiye did not have a central role during the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo; nor did Türkiye sufficiently involve in the issues of Middle East, such as Iran-Iraq war or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. So, despite the changes in the foreign and security policy in the post-Cold War international system; for Buzan and Waever Türkiye was still an insulator state albeit its being an 'active' one (Buzan and Waever, 2003: 395) since it could not create a coherent strategic arena involving its surrounding RSCs. Moreover, Buzan and Diez suggested elsewhere that Türkiye should play the 'active' insulator role as an alternative to becoming an EU member (Buzan and Diez, 1999). With its geographical location, and the ability of blocking against multiple threats and to establish connectivity between regions (Imai, 2016: 26), Türkiye has been provided a role of insulator and it was still so in the late 2002. The general elections of November 2002 proved in retrospect to be a defining moment in Türkiye's recent history as an Islamic oriented party, AKP rose to power and began to gradually change the policy and ideology of Turkish foreign policy. The change offered during the 1990s has rose to prominence properly with AKP in power: Türkiye began to pursue considerably active foreign policy.

Middle East has been the region where this active foreign policy was first sought to be realized. So far, Türkiye did not involve deeply in the issues of Middle East; it has played mostly secondary roles as an insulator. However, the new government established amicable relations with Syria at the beginning despite the US disapproval; invited Hamas leader Ismail Haniyah deemed by Israel as terrorist and agitator of suicide bombings and approached Iran under the pretext of struggle against PKK. All these

moves were seen as the signifiers of Türkiye's deviation from traditional foreign policy strategy and ideology.

The AKP administration's understanding of foreign policy was different from the traditional foreign policy understanding in some basic principles: the relation of zero problems with neighbors, a multilateral and multi-dimensional policy in line with Türkiye's central character, developing a new diplomatic style, and discourse and switching from a stable diplomacy to a pro-active diplomacy that could adapt to the dynamic conditions in the international and regional arena. According to the government policy, Türkiye is no longer a front state as in the Cold War and nor is it a bridge between East and West as in the post-Cold War; Türkiye should become a regional and pivot power with its history, geography, and strategic depth (Ersoy-Ceylan, 2021). Grigoriadis (2010) describes this new strategy as Davutoğlu doctrine: more independent, assertive, active, and multi-dimensional and integrated.

Türkiye under AKP government has declared its will to be a player, a regional power. One fundamental logic behind this shift of policy is neo-Ottomanism. This ideology has served as one of the main conceptual tools for understanding new Turkish foreign policy. Neo-Ottomanism which was first made popular by Turgut Özal (Fuller, 1992) seeks to establish a Turkish sphere of influence in the former Ottoman geography by exploiting the power vacuums created by conflicts and tensions in those areas via soft power projection and material forms of power (Hoffman and Cemgil, 2016). The neo-Ottoman vision ascribed Türkiye a more active role in the former territory of the Ottoman state rather than expansionism. However, unlike Özal period, AKP executives has idealized the Ottoman past and the concept of neo-Ottomanism has begun to be understood as a counter narrative to the secular Western republican ideology, a perspective not envisaged by Turgut Özal (Uzer, 2020). Besides, the neo-Ottoman discourse is the political formulation of Ottoman nostalgia exhibited by Davutoğlu (2007) in his book *Strategic Depth* that aims to energize and mobilize voters of AKP, so first and foremost it was for inside public opinion. However, according to Baskın Oran (2013: 198) despite being intended firstly to Turkish public opinion, this rhetoric has drawbacks beyond Türkiye's borders. The rise of Türkiye's deep interest in the Middle East -which is compatible with neo-Ottoman rhetoric- has been questioned by Arab countries and perceived as a new Ottoman expansionism.

The change of ideology and strategy in Turkish foreign policy affected gradually Türkiye's bilateral relations in the surrounding countries, particularly in the Middle East. Special attention should be paid on the Israeli-Turkish relations as mutual relations deteriorated and ultimately severed throughout the AKP rule (Ersoy-Ceylan, 2021). There is an ideological catalyst behind cooling of Türkiye's relations with Israel. It was Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's standpoint claiming that Turkish-Israeli partnership has been an alienating factor in determining Türkiye's political identity. Only if Türkiye wishes to be a regional player, it must distance itself from this strategic partnership

which has undermined Türkiye's effectiveness in the region. According to Davutoğlu (2007: 57) it was wrong to determine Türkiye's regional policies according to Israel "a state having only fifty years of past in the region". Davutoğlu's approach to Israel has obviously been ideologically characterized and displays that Islam and foreign policy is intertwined in his understanding. Hence, the newly adopted proactive stance in foreign policy aiming to position Türkiye as a player rather than an insulator has its domestic roots in neo-Ottoman Islamic vision of AKP and demonstrates a rupture from the Western oriented, balancing and status quo supporter stance.

Türkiye's ambition to become a regional player under AKP has found international support at the beginning. Along with the newly elected AKP's ideology and pro-active foreign policy strategy, the congruity of international conjuncture and the role attributed to AKP by the US as well might be esteemed as the enablers and facilitators of steps taken by the AKP administrations towards making Türkiye a player. The US secretary of State Hillary Clinton has stressed at that time that the US was eager for engaging full partnership with Türkiye and defined the country as an emerging global power along with countries such as China, Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa (Dünya, 2009). It is crucial to acknowledge that this statement came at a time when American hegemony was on decline and has lost prestige in the Middle East (Kalaitzidis, 2015). Under Obama, US has changed strategy regarding the region and adopted the policy of leading from behind (Löflmann, 2015). According to this policy, the moderate Islamic movements that had grassroots supports would be backed and steered in the direction the US desired. Likewise, the initiatives such as alliance of civilizations would be supported to ease the tensions arising from cultural/religious discrepancies. Hence Türkiye has begun to be seen as a 'model' with its almost Muslim population, its engagement to global neo-liberal economy and its candidature to EU membership. Türkiye was a country where Islam, democracy and development could be found and would be an example of these three could coexist. Consequently, the rhetoric that Türkiye could be a model, even a leader to the Middle East was supported by the West and the US. Particularly the US would willingly prefer Türkiye, a close ally, and a NATO member to fill the power vacuum in the Middle East (Oran, 2013: 195). Believing to capture the *zeitgeist*, the AKP executives embraced the issue of becoming a model since it was compatible with the new foreign strategy of becoming a player in the region. However, this strategy of the US has soon been proven ill-calculated. The Davutoğlu doctrine coupled with the rhetoric of being a model adopted by the West has led to overconfidence among the AKP executives. Yet, this attitude that is emerging from Türkiye's self-perception as a regional pivot has been perceived as a threat by the countries in the Middle East, reinforcing its position as an *assertive insulator*, assertive in its vision yet isolated in practice. Despite its rhetoric and support at the beginning, the US has eventually found this stance extravagant. At the beginning, the change of paradigm in Turkish foreign policy might be seen as promising since it was compatible with the interests of the global powers and thus with the international conjuncture. One might

suggest that the redefinition of foreign policy has been possible by way of favorable conditions in the international arena. The change in the state level went parallel with the changes in the system level.

AKP government's will to be a player consolidated during the Arab Spring process. AKP executives sought to take advantage of this regional transformation to build its own regional hegemony. Accordingly, a moderate Islamic belt would emerge under the leadership of Türkiye in Eastern Mediterranean basin. However, the new foreign policy which has functioned coherently with the West so far, began to transform from 2009 onwards and this process of transformation has reached its climax in 2011. Uzel (2017) offers five developments that have paved the way for the government's disengaging of Turkish interests from the Western interests: First, AKP executives began to believe that the Arab Spring has ensured the suitable circumstances in realization of neo-Ottoman theses. Secondly with Davos incident Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has gained sympathy of Arab Street; this has strengthened his image of a regional leader and thus augmented self-confidence as well. Thirdly, Türkiye seemed persuaded that it could fulfil the power vacuum generated by the Obama's statement that US would withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan. Fourthly, the praise of AKP administration by the West and Türkiye's receiving higher votes in non-permanent membership elections to UNSC has resulted with overconfidence regarding Türkiye's own power. And finally, the economic growth and election performance of the party has augmented self-confidence of AKP executives.

Within this background, during the Arab Spring Türkiye has changed its policy of soft power regarding the Middle East into hard power policy, particularly in Syria. It has engaged with the process of both political and economic penetration in the region. Therefore, Türkiye has tried to build a new hegemony alternative to Western hegemony. However, as countries like Libya, Syria and Iraq disintegrated, there was left no country to lead. Besides, by 2012 zero problems with neighbors became a dream (Oran, 2013: 196). On the contrary, Türkiye became isolated by facing opposition of both Egypt and Israel. Ultimately, Ankara was marginalized when Greece, Israel, and Southern Cyprus turned into allies.

The strategy of making Türkiye a "centre state", a regional player, has initially coincided with the US identification of these kind of countries as pivotal states from which it seeks regional responsibility in the name of US. In this case, the pivotal state might find a space of autonomy and it can use it; but this usage of power within a certain space of autonomy might also create an illusion. Türkiye has had this kind of autonomy during certain periods: in 1990s Türkiye has been assumed as a big brother in Central Asia, as a model and a leader in the Middle East in 2000s. However, none of these initiatives were allowed to become the alternative projects against Western interests. AKP government has introduced an ambitious foreign policy strategy that sought to make Türkiye a regional player in the former Ottoman territories, particularly in the Middle East. Due to the false notion that it could act

independently from other regional actors and global powers, Türkiye has taken miscalculated steps which engendered Türkiye's alienation and isolation (Adisonmez and Oztig, 2024).

In this context, Türkiye's attempt to transcend its insulator identity and reposition itself as a regional power can be analytically traced through a series of critical junctures. This study identifies four key turning points in the evolution of Turkish foreign policy that underpin its transformation into an *assertive insulator*: (1) the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, marking an ideological and strategic shift; (2) the 2009 Davos crisis, which signalled a break with Israel and a more vocal regional posture; (3) the 2011 Arab Spring, during which Türkiye began to actively project its leadership aspirations; and (4) the post-2016 period, characterized by the consolidation of nationalist-security discourses most notably the "Blue Homeland" doctrine under the AKP-MHP alliance. These moments reveal not only a rhetorical transformation but also a structural reorientation of Türkiye's foreign and security policy. However, rather than facilitating full integration into a regional security complex, these assertive efforts have culminated in Türkiye's positioning as a *liminal actor* i.e. a state caught between ambition and structural constraint. This hybrid status is best captured by the concept of the *assertive insulator*, which this study advances as a theoretical refinement of RSCT. Eastern Mediterranean is the current sub-region where this hybrid status is displayed.

4. WHAT WENT WRONG? TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

The relative space of autonomy that Türkiye has gained owing to the transformation of the international system was assumed by AKP administration as an opportunity to become a regional player and the decision makers acted accordingly. However, this policy proved unsuccessful and towards the end of the Arab Spring Türkiye was marginalized in the region and Turkish foreign policy is described as "precious loneliness". At this point it might be suggested that Türkiye has entered a process of strategic withdrawal and has turned to Eastern Mediterranean to make strategic moves. However, the government have been pursuing a policy of isolation, self-exclusion from the regional geopolitics. The most crucial consequences of this stance have been the parceling of maritime zones by other actors in the region and the realization of agreements between the countries and energy companies to extract gas/oil in their maritime zones.

Along with Türkiye, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Lebanon, Libya, Egypt, Greece, Syria, Israel, and Southern Cyprus surround Eastern Mediterranean. Aside from regional actors, the global powers such as US, Russia, UK, France, and Italy have interests regarding the region. Energy companies should be included as the actors of the region as they began to operate in the region following the recent hydrocarbon discoveries. In 2010, the US Geological Survey (USGS) published an assessment of the potential for undiscovered oil and gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. According to the

research, the average estimate of undiscovered oil and natural gas (NGL) resources in the Eastern Mediterranean is approximately 5.3 billion barrels (Gb); The estimated volume of undiscovered natural gas resources is around 3,450 billion cubic meters, making the basin even more important (Karbuz 2012, 214). The amounts in question are undoubtedly too large to go unnoticed by both international and national energy companies. Thus, both international and local energy companies such as ExxonMobil and Noble Energy of the US, Total of France, Eni energy company of Italy, Kogas of South Korea, Qatar Petroleum, British Gas, Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) and Delek Drilling and Avner Oil of Israel (Alexandrova-Arbotova, 2018) are in play in the region.

The security environment in the Eastern Mediterranean regional sub-system (Tziampiris, 2019) is Hobbesian and characterized by multiple sources of insecurity and instability, and by continuing change and evolution as well (Dokos, 2012: 575). In terms of security, the region is problematic as there are key regional conflicts that has not been resolved yet. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the security concerns stemming from the Iranian foreign policy, the Syrian civil war, the Arab Spring, the threats posed by non-state actors such as ISIL and PKK are the major security issues shaping foreign policies of the pivotal states – Türkiye, Israel, and Egypt in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean has begun to take shape from 1950s onwards. Türkiye has established first implicit then open relationship with Israel while Greece and Greek Cypriots stayed closer to Arabs (Ersoy, 2019: 111). As an outside actor and global power, US has played its role in preventing and calming the tensions and crises between Türkiye and Greece. As mentioned before, Türkiye, as an insulator, did not interfere with the Middle Eastern issues directly as they were not relevant to Türkiye's security composition in the first hand. In Greece, on the other hand, the popular sympathy and support for the Palestinian case was more powerful than in Türkiye. This balance of power between the actors of the region has continued until Davos incident in 2009 and Mavi Marmara affair in 2010. The relations between Israel and Türkiye have been in decline for a while and severed following these developments. The political attitude against Israel was consistent with the discourse prevalent both in AKP ideology and in Turkish Islamic movement. However, aside from this ideological stance the shift in policy toward Israel was a necessary precondition for the government to play a more proactive role in the Middle East (Tziampiris, 2019). In these circumstances, Israel got closer to Greece while Türkiye became lonely day by day since Ankara's relations with Egypt deteriorated as well during the Arab Spring process (Magued, 2016). In this sense, according to Uzgel (2020), the recent transformation in the Eastern Mediterranean policy is an example to an effort to compensate the losses after spoiling a balance without previously placing it with a better one. Another catalyst which had effects on the balance of power in the region is the hydrocarbon discoveries. Considering that Türkiye imports 75 percent of the energy it consumes, it can be argued that the resources in the Eastern Mediterranean can diversify the country's energy resources and give Türkiye

the ability to maneuver against traditional energy suppliers such as Iran and Russia. However, there is a long-standing issue between Greece and Türkiye regarding both maritime rights and borders. In this respect, the issue of sharing and ownership of reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean is a sensitive issue for Türkiye, both in financial and security contexts (Tsakiris, Ulgen and Han, 2018).

The Cyprus issue occupies a central place in Türkiye's Eastern Mediterranean policy. Therefore, it is in a position to postpone making concessions to Southern Cypriot energy companies for exploration and drilling until a final result is obtained on the Cyprus issue. On the other hand, in line with the claim of the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus, natural gas and oil fields in the Eastern Mediterranean were divided into 13 exploration parcels. Accordingly, parcels 1, 2 and 3 are in the north, parcels 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 13 are in the middle, parcels 10, 11 and 12 are in the south. Of these, parcels 10 and 11 have been the subject of dispute between Türkiye and the Southern Cyprus because the Greek Cypriot Administration unilaterally declared them as its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Dilaver, 2018). Additionally, Southern Cyprus has given permission to foreign companies to explore and extract gas in these blocks. Again, in 2002, when the Southern Cyprus gave permission to the Norwegian research ship Northern Access to conduct seismic research, the ship in question was blocked by the TCG Giresun frigate coming from the Aksaz military base in Türkiye. Following the agreement determining the exclusive economic zones signed between Egypt and the Southern Cyprus in 2004, Türkiye gave a note to the United Nations (UN) to protect its interests in the region. In this note, Türkiye has demonstrated its legal sovereign rights in the western part of 32° 16' 18" East longitude in its territorial waters arising from international law (Avan 2020). In addition, an agreement was signed between Türkiye and TRNC on 21 September 2011, sharing the continental shelf in the east, north and south of Cyprus (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs). With another agreement, TPAO obtained exploration rights in some parts of blocks 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 12 and 13 (Tsakiris, Ulgen and Han, 2018).

Hence, once believed to be a stabilizing factor between the regional actors, the energy issue has recently become one of the significant bones of contention. So far, today, Greece, Türkiye, Israel, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Southern Cyprus have issued statements of intent regarding the gas finds in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Moreover, the natural gas discovery provided a shared strategic interest among Israel, Greece and Southern Cyprus that have culminated with the signing of an agreement in 2010 in Nicosia by Israeli Minister of Infrastructure Uzi Landau and the Cypriot Foreign Minister Markos Kyprianou that defined mutually their EEZs (Ynet News 2010) notwithstanding Türkiye's objections. Israel and Southern Cyprus then signed various agreements for co-exploitation of the natural gas reserves (Bilgin, 2019: 205).

Due to this relation based on shared interest between Israel and Southern Cyprus, Israel and Greece sought to build strategic channels for cooperation (Gürel and Le Cornu 2014). In this vein, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suggested building a pipeline connection via Cyprus when he

visited Greece. The transport of Israeli and Southern Cyprus natural gas to Europe via Greece would change the country's geo-economics and geopolitical position in the region (Ersoy, 2019: 134). In a sense, both countries saw a win-win situation in establishing a strategic relationship within the framework of energy cooperation. The rapprochement was materialized with the signing of a tripartite energy memorandum between Israel, Greece and Southern Cyprus in 2013 according to which the 2000-megawatt EuroAsia Interconnector would lift Southern Cyprus and Israel out of energy isolation through cheaper electricity. Additionally, the export of the electricity to the European energy market via cable was planned. Owing to geographical proximity between gas fields, Israel and Southern Cyprus have sought to create an energy block (Ersoy, 2019). Southern Cyprus's determination to proceed unilaterally ignoring Northern Cyprus have concerned Türkiye as Ankara would prefer to see a revenue-sharing agreement with the Northern Cyprus (IISS, 2013). It should be mentioned that Southern Cyprus had already signed EEZ agreements with Egypt and Lebanon in 2003 and 2007 respectively. However, it could not come to a conclusive EEZ agreement in its negotiations with Lebanon like the one with Israel which has been much more fruitful (Özertem, 2016: 363).

Moreover, the government was alert when Southern Cyprus signed statement of intent on security cooperation with US in 2018 (US Department of State) and an agreement warranting the usage of naval bases with France in 2019 (Ekathimerini, 2019). Ankara immediately slammed the defense deal between France and Southern Cyprus and described the agreement unacceptable under any circumstances. Consequently, the history of conflict in the region added to the overlapping claims regarding EEZs and gas finds, have fostered polarity in the region which presents a long-term security dilemma for regional states, complicated by the convulsions of the Arab spring and the interests of extra-regional powers (IISS, 2013). In such a sub-security complex, the deterioration and rupture in Türkiye's relations with Israel and Egypt, which can be described as regional actors, have complicated Türkiye's desire and strategy to position itself as a regional player.

The discovery of energy resources coincided with a change in Israel's political calculations. The discovered gas fields alleviated Israel's concerns about the possibility of Egypt cutting off its natural gas exports. Yet, Israel found the opportunity to export gas to Europe via Leviathan natural gas fields. It should be reiterated that there are still maritime disputes over these fields between Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel. However, Israel insists that the fields are determined on legal grounds despite Lebanon's accusation that Israel is stealing its resources. This situation was resolved in February 2022 when Washington mediated the signing of a maritime border agreement between Israel and Lebanon, allowing both countries to begin gas exploration and drilling activities in previously disputed waters (Nakhle, 2023). Likewise, PA and Hamas denounced Israeli actions in the water that comprise Gaza's EEZ and defined Israeli efforts as an act of theft (IISS, 2013).

Today, the situation has become even more complex. The ongoing war in Gaza has made energy security and the future of energy fields in the region a problem. At a time when Israel increased its gas production from 16.11 billion cubic meters in 2020 to 21.92 billion cubic meters in 2023 and expanded its energy cooperation with Egypt (Das, 2020: 227), the Palestinian issue, which had been removed from the political agenda during Netanyahu's governments, resurfaced with Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7 and Israel's subsequent war on Gaza. As a result, the security of energy supply in the Eastern Mediterranean was also jeopardized. At a time when the Eastern Mediterranean seemed to be entering a stage where energy security and cooperation were being achieved, the ongoing Hamas-Israel war has complicated not only regional but also global politics. Two days after Hamas's surprise attacks, on October 9, Israel suspended production at Tamar, its second-largest gas field, due to security concerns. This could put Egypt in a difficult situation, as the government is struggling to meet the country's increasing gas consumption (S&P Global, 2023). Israel's closure of the oil terminal in Ashkelon to ships due to rocket attacks (UKP&I, 2024) was another indication that regional instability is endangering energy supply security. Hezbollah's participation to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, has worsened the already existing energy crisis in Lebanon. If the war continues, the interim government in Lebanon will not have the capacity to deal with new emergencies. On the other hand, the conflict affects the shipping traffic in Lebanon, ultimately putting more pressure on the already struggling economy (Raydan, 2023).

Egypt, on the other hand, ceased to export its gas for several reasons related to the revolution and chaos from 2011 onwards and was very busy with the domestic issues. However, in recent years, Egypt has sought to become a key player in the Eastern Mediterranean energy politics (Meredith and Turak, 2019). Particularly after the discovery of the Zohr gas field in 2015, Egypt's natural gas potential has increased and is expected to become a net gas exporter in 2020 (El-Bar, 2019). Egypt was considered an ideal partner for the European Union (EU), which did not want to be dependent on Russian gas. Therefore, gas exports to Europe became Cairo's main energy policy, and this goal paved the way for Israel-Egypt dialogue. In fact, in June 2022, the EU signed a memorandum of understanding with Egypt and Israel for the transportation of gas produced in both countries to the continent via Egypt's two underutilized liquefied natural gas facilities (European Commission).

The dialogue has been possible with the regime change in Egypt (Agdemir, 2016) as al-Sisi became the president; Egypt has become an attractive option for Israel in mapping a route for Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe (Özertem, 2016) in a circumstance where the bilateral relations between Türkiye and Israel have deteriorated. Thus, the cooperation in the energy policy between Egypt has revealed political implications as well (Baghdad, 2013). As the Turkish-Israeli relations disrupted especially following the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010 and the Turkish-Egyptian relations worsened; the polarity between the regional powers crystallized and a new balance of power began to emerge.

The old conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean were further complicated by the internal wars in Syria and Libya following the Arab Spring, acting as catalysts for instability. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), competing with Türkiye for regional influence, siding with Greece and the Southern Cyprus made the emerging new balance of power clearer. In the Libyan civil war, Greece and the Southern Cyprus supported Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army, against the Fayed al-Sarraj government. Meanwhile, Türkiye signed an agreement with the Sarraj government in November 2019 to delineate maritime boundaries. However, Türkiye's move caused Egypt, whose relations with Ankara had deteriorated due to Türkiye's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, to join the opposing alliance. France and the United States also did not support Türkiye due to recently conflicting interests. Italy also diverged from Türkiye in terms of interests and goals due to partial disagreements over the exploitation of gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean (Cerami 2024). As a result, an alliance excluding Ankara emerged in the region. The US, which previously relied on the Türkiye-Israel axis for regional security, gradually turned to Greece and the Southern Cyprus, and in reaction to Türkiye's deteriorating relations with Israel and Egypt, strengthened the Israel - Greece - France- Southern Cyprus- Egypt axis. Ultimately, a quasi-anti-Türkiye club, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, was formed in January 2019. The members included the Southern Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Greece, Italy, Jordan, and France; the US joined the club as a permanent observer (Mitchell, 2020). In such a context, Türkiye sought to balance the US and EU support for this new formation in the Eastern Mediterranean by gaining the support of Russia and China. However, this effort was unsuccessful as both countries preferred to remain neutral (Bardakçı, 2022).

Facing the polarization and rising challenges at the regional level, Türkiye took certain steps. The government tried to respond with a three-dimensional reaction: strategic, economic, and legal. Marcou (2022) argues that these steps, taken by Türkiye through "maritime nationalism", not only addressed the multiple crises affecting the Eastern Mediterranean and its surroundings but also reflected an outreach attempt. This observation aligns with the policies adopted by the government which targeted transition from an isolated country to a regional power. However, in recent years, political tensions that have damaged Türkiye's relations with both its Western allies and regional neighbors have tested this power policy with the realities of a "conflictual neighborhood", revealing its contradictions and limitations.

The strategic aspect of this three-dimensional reaction relates to natural gas. Natural gas discoveries could strategically enable Türkiye to contribute to European energy security, alleviate the burden from domestic energy consumption, and as a country with a coastline on the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye had interests and rights in the sharing and utilization of regional resources (Özertem, 2016: 366). Following developments in the energy sector in the early 2000s, Türkiye resorted to power diplomacy to protect its interests (Bardakçı, 2022: 522). To ensure maritime security, Türkiye launched the Mediterranean Shield Operation in April 2006. In this context, Türkiye ensured the security

of research vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean and warned unauthorized ships (Peker et al. 2019). Ankara also signed a continental shelf agreement with Southern Cyprus in 2011, allowing Türkiye to conduct exercises along the southern coasts of the island. TRNC President Derviş Eroğlu described this agreement as a ‘precautionary measure to ensure that our Greek counterparts withdraw’ (IISS, 2013). Türkiye declared that it did not recognize the Southern Cyprus’s EEZ and bilateral agreements with other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean (Ersoy, 2021). President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that Turkish ships would be seen more frequently in these waters and that Israel could no longer act as it pleased in the Eastern Mediterranean (IISS, 2013).

The legal aspect of Ankara’s policy against the emerging new balance of power involved an agreement with the UN-recognized government in Libya on November 27, 2019, delineating maritime boundaries and military cooperation. Alongside the Military and Security Cooperation agreement, the agreement on the mutual determination of EEZs with Libya expanded Türkiye’s borders from the southern Mediterranean coast to Libya's northeastern coast. This new arrangement ignored the presence of large Greek islands like Crete and was thus more related to Eastern Mediterranean politics than Libya (Dalay, 2021). With this agreement, Ankara aimed to draw the western border of its EEZ while creating political maneuvering space and obstructing the strategic cooperation among Southern Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, and Greece (Yaycı, 2020). This agreement caused a reaction in Greece, arguing that it violated international maritime law and threatened the drilling interests of the Southern Cyprus and Crete. Southern Cyprus announced that it would apply to the International Court of Justice. Meanwhile, the Türkiye-Libya agreement overlapped with Greece's delineated maritime boundaries. In response, Greece declared the Libyan ambassador in Athens persona non grata and demanded his departure. Türkiye’s move paved the way for Greece to sign a similar agreement with Egypt on maritime jurisdictions in August 2020.

It is possible to interpret these developments as Türkiye’s attempt to act strategically in the Eastern Mediterranean to end its exclusion from both energy and regional formations. In this respect, Türkiye’s step towards Libya is in line with the geopolitical concept ‘Mavi Vatan’ or Blue Homeland. Blue homeland doctrine was first coined in 2006 by retired Admiral Cem Gürdeniz with anti-Western and Eurasianist background. The concept was further promoted by the former Chief of Staff of the Turkish Navy, Rear Admiral Cihat Yaycı who is also the architect of Türkiye’s maritime boundaries deal with Libya. Although it is not an official doctrine or policy, Blue Homeland concept provides a narrative for legitimizing AKP government’s Eastern Mediterranean policy domestically. According to this narrative, Türkiye is caged to Anatolia, for this reason it needs to maintain access and high profile in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean (Dalay, 2021). From this point, one might argue that the maritime deal with Libya is the manifestation of the expanded vision and understanding of Türkiye’s maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Although Blue Homeland concept goes back to mid-2000s, it has only gained support of the AKP executives and become Türkiye's strategy in territorial waters only after 2016. When the concept was introduced, it was the heyday of the approach of 'zero problems with neighbors' in AKP's foreign strategy. But especially after 15th July, a new policy has emerged; AKP has allied with MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) and has inclined towards nationalist discourses and practices. Therefore, there occurred a balance between nationalist sector and Islamism. This new balance is reflected in foreign policy as a consensus between zero problems doctrine and blue homeland concept based on a new security policy. 'Mavi Vatan' concept, which has become an approach of current politics and strategy under these conditions, has been adopted by the government as a solution to Türkiye's isolation in the region.

Currently, the Eastern Mediterranean's pivotal powers have formed quasi-alliances in line with their interests. And Türkiye has fallen outside this new alliance. In this context, Southern Cyprus, Egypt and Israel have created one pole in the region and as a response, Türkiye, Libya and Northern Cyprus have created another one to balance the power in the region. Likewise, Türkiye was opted out from East Mediterranean Gas Forum which has several Mediterranean members and following the signature of agreement with Libya; France, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates have been added to this bloc. Despite making efforts to ensure an alliance, one must point out that Türkiye still faces unprecedented isolation in the region with weakening relations with its traditional allies. However, Türkiye's Eastern Mediterranean policy also goes beyond its relations with its immediate neighbors. Relations with Egypt, Israel and other regional actors involve a dynamic of both cooperation and competition. Balancing economic interests, security concerns and geopolitical considerations can shape Türkiye's approach to this complex web of relationships.

In the face of these challenges, Ankara has recently engaged in diplomatic activities to re-consolidate its presence in the region. The normalization steps taken since 2020 are efforts to end Türkiye's isolation in the region. In this context, and with the influence of increasing energy price pressure and the normalization process with Israel as one of the regional stakeholders, news emerged about an attempt to revive the project of building the old submarine pipeline connecting Israel to Türkiye for the distribution of gas from the Israeli Leviathan field (Anadolu Agency). Accordingly, Eastern Mediterranean gas could be connected to the TANAP pipeline, through which Azerbaijani gas is transported to Italy via Greece and Albania, via an onshore pipeline connection. According to international law, this pipeline could pass through the exclusive economic zones of other countries as long as it did not cause environmental problems. However, the current political conditions are an obstacle to this energy cooperation. It does not seem possible for the Greek Cypriot government, which is one of the places where the line in question will pass, to agree to this. Therefore, from a political point

of view, the idea that such an initiative could serve as a catalyst in solving the problems in the region is unrealistic (Stergiou, 2023: 618-619).

Starting from 2021, Türkiye has endeavored to develop a dialogue to re-establish relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the countries in the emerging block in the Eastern Mediterranean. Especially during the Arab Spring, Türkiye's anti-status quo, pro-revolutionary attitude supporting political Islam, with the intention of becoming a regional power, came in contrast with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's attitude of preserving the regional status quo; therefore, Ankara's relations with these two countries were damaged due to sharp ideological lines (Jabbour, 2022: 7-8). It can be argued that the steps taken after Türkiye was excluded from the regional equation included a pragmatic and win-win rapprochement imposed by realpolitik. As a matter of fact, Duran (2022: 171) states that "these changes in the foreign policy strategy, which ultimately isolates Türkiye, are not due to ideological pursuits", but rather "a choice that aims to deal with certain threats such as refugees, terrorism and proxy wars and takes into account the changing priorities of the period and the relevant actors". However, it is worth noting that distrust between the parties still continues. Ankara's quest for power and status at the regional and global level still continues, and it seems unclear to what extent it will meet the demands of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, who expect to inhibit Türkiye's "interventionist foreign policy". On the other hand, it should be argued that Türkiye's hopes of eroding Saudi Arabia's energy cooperation with Greece and Southern Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean, in addition to economic gains, may not come true with this rapprochement (Jabbour, 2022: 18).

5. CONCLUSION

Türkiye's Eastern Mediterranean policy is based on a multi-faceted basis that combines historical claims, economic interests and geopolitics. In this respect, regional relations are complex and it is essential to maintain a delicate balance policy to direct these relations. On the other hand, the Eastern Mediterranean continues to be one of the focal points of global politics. Therefore, Türkiye's policy towards the region and its relations with its neighbors will inevitably shape both its position in international relations and future dynamics in the region.

İlter Turan (2015: 42) describes the current situation in which Türkiye is found as the period of "Lonely Hero"; "a country that argues that its policies are right even when no other country is in full agreement". When AKP rose to power in 2002, there were signs that Türkiye's relations would be more comprehensive and multi-dimensional with the changes both in the system level and in the state level. Initially, the government has remained within the Atlantic community. However, it was obvious that Turkish foreign policy would be different under AKP since the party's foreign policy ideology was

different from the traditional policy which imposed foresight based on the principle “peace at home peace in the world”. This line was left around mid-2000s and Turkish foreign policy came to be characterized with assuming a regional leadership role, making Türkiye a player rather than an insulator existing with precaution at the margins of multiple regions. Initially, Türkiye has proven to be successful in pursuing this pro-active stance; mediated the conflicts in its region, addressed the existent problems with its neighbors, improved its relations thus mobilized the support of international community.

However, because of strategic miscalculations, this relative success was short lived. In the region where no actor pursues a strategy on its own, Türkiye’s attempt to continue its policy without an ally can be read as a reflection (and/or illusion) of its desire to become a regional power. Although Türkiye tried to overcome this by signing an agreement with Libya, it should be noted that the country’s Eastern Mediterranean policy was not carried out on a certain axis and ultimately faced the formation of an alliance in which it had no place. This result stems from the miscalculation that the country can shape and direct the dynamics in the region on its way to becoming a regional power.

It is essential to maintain the balance of pragmatism and ideology in foreign policy making. The vision of transforming Türkiye’s role into a strong actor rather than the role of insulator is important. While it was possible to realize this vision, strategic mistakes were made. In the final analysis, in order to end Türkiye’s regional isolation, President Erdoğan emphasized consensus and dialogue and called for a conference to include all Mediterranean countries in order to find a peaceful and diplomatic solution to the crises in the region and following the normalization initiated with Israel, the Gulf countries also agreed. It is possible to see the ongoing dialogue process as a new re-reading of Turkish foreign policy.

In this regard, the findings of the present study substantiate the explanatory power of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) in accounting for Türkiye’s position within the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye’s traditional designation as an insulator state which is situated at the intersection of multiple regional security complexes yet belonging to none, is largely confirmed by the structural dynamics outlined in RSCT. Although the AKP government’s proactive foreign policy and aspiration to transform Türkiye into a regional power signified a deliberate departure from this insulator role, the structural constraints identified by the theory have ultimately limited the effectiveness of this strategic shift. The study demonstrates that Türkiye’s pursuit of regional influence, absent a coherent alignment with the prevailing security configurations, has instead deepened its isolation.

Therefore, the empirical analysis presented here reinforces RSCT’s core assertion that structural positioning within regional security complexes imposes tangible constraints on states’ agency, particularly in cases where perceived aspirations are misaligned with systemic realities. Yet, the Turkish case also reveals conceptual gaps within the theory itself. The persistent, assertive efforts of Türkiye to

reposition itself in the Eastern Mediterranean suggest a distinct category of actor, one that cannot be neatly classified as either a passive insulator or an established regional power. This study has thus introduced the notion of the *assertive insulator*, a state caught in the liminal space between structural marginality and strategic ambition. As such, the findings not only validate RSCT's explanatory framework but also invite its typological expansion to better account for transitional and hybrid actor roles within regional security dynamics.

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