

SHOW OF FORCE OR FEAR?
THE ROLE OF UAVS IN TURKISH POLITICS

*Korkunun Emaresi mi Gücün Göstergesi mi?
İha'ların Türkiye Siyasetindeki Rolü*

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ABSTRACT

Türkiye has been climbing the list of global arms exporters in recent years. The intensive investments in domestic warfare technologies, especially in armed drones, have been a central element contributing to this trend. Despite criticisms, Turkish expertise in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has received positive feedback from different segments of society. Whether it has been a foreign or domestic policy tool, the Turkish drones have been changing the nature of warfare as they have proved themselves more than effective in various regional combats. Although the UAV production's successful effect on Turkish foreign policy can be further debated, there can be little or no doubt about the support they received within the borders. This paper aims to further explore whether this backing was aimed at as the result of an intentional political strategy of the AKP government to repel the growing domestic audience costs or as a side action of neo-Ottoman policies of the ruling party in retrospect of its manifesto.

Keywords: UAV, Neo-Ottomanism, Domestic Audience Cost Theory

KORKUNUN EMARESİ Mİ GÜCÜN GÖSTERGESİ Mİ? İHA'LARIN TÜRKİYE SİYASETİNDEKİ ROLÜ

ÖZET

Türkiye son yıllarda küresel silah ihracatçıları listesinde yükselmeye devam etmektedir. Yerli savaş teknolojilerine, özellikle silahlı insansız hava araçlarına yapılan yoğun yatırımlar, bu trende katkıda bulunan merkezi bir unsur haline gelmiştir. Eleştirilere rağmen, Türk uzmanlığı insansız hava araçlarında toplumun farklı kesimlerinden olumlu geri dönüşler almaktadır. İster dış politika aracı olsun ister iç politika aracı, Türk insansız hava araçları, çeşitli bölgesel çatışmalarda kendilerini etkili bir şekilde kanıtladıkları için savaşın doğasını değiştirmektedir. İHA üretiminin Türk dış politikasındaki başarılı etkisi daha fazla tartışılabilirken, sınırlar içinde aldıkları destek konusunda şüpheye pek az yer kalmaya başlamıştır. Bu makale, bu desteğin AKP hükümetinin artan iç kamuoyu maliyetlerini bertaraf etmek amacıyla kasıtlı bir siyasi stratejinin sonucu olarak mı yoksa iktidar partisinin manifestosuna bakıldığında Yeni-Osmanlı politikalarının yan eylemi olarak mı hedeflendiğini daha fazla araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: SİHA, Yeni-Osmanlılık, İç Kitle Maliyeti Teorisi

INTRODUCTION

The ever-evolving nature of international conflicts is significantly influenced by advancements in warfare technologies. The critical question arising from this evolving context is whether each new development in the armament industry directly impacts states' policy-making or if the reverse is true, where policies shape technological signs of progress. By presuming that the latter relationship exists, this study aims to concentrate on a specific set of technological advancements in warfare, analyzed through a comparative theoretical lens between two prominent approaches. What is prominent is that, whether the double-edged diplomacy approach or the domestic political interest-seeking perspective holds more explanatory power, the undeniable pioneering of some middle-power countries in arms trade requires further deliberation.

As the nature of international armed conflicts evolves, localized clashes have become the primary means by which governments utilize their defense and security systems.¹ Border security has grown in importance, and with the advent of new warfare technologies, targeted killing has become a notable trend. The traditional arms race of the Cold War, characterized by the competition for nuclear weapons, has shifted towards a race for technological advancements. Although they are

not threatening humanity's extinction, they can still demonstrate enough superiority to intimidate opponents. Within this broader context of unpredictability, the integration of new military capabilities such as armed drones raises questions about whether there is a correlation between possessing certain capabilities and being more prone to engage in an armed conflict. Indeed, if the motivation of the decision-makers can be interpreted as avoiding the 'body-bag syndrome' that eventually bears the potential to damage domestic support, Walsh's understanding of UAVs holds the promise of reducing political costs at home for their users.² Accompanying Walsh, various scholars have discussed the dual nature of political decision-making processes, referring to simultaneous domestic and international considerations, calling it "a two-level game". As many of its counterparts deal with the very same problem, Turkey seems to find itself at a privileged intersection as the country leverages a 20-year-long investment in its independent defense industries. However, within the context of Turkey, the simultaneous success of the ruling government in the recent elections could be perceived as the surfacing of the Neo-Ottoman tendencies of the party. Moreover, those wins might not be just coincidental in terms of observing them at the same time with the exponential growth of the nationalistic arms industry, which is resulting in export championships.

1 Stein, Arthur A., and Steven E. Lobell. "Geostructuralism and International Politics: The End of the Cold War and the Regionalization of International Security." *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (1997): 101-22.

2 Williams, Paul D. "Security Studies: An Introduction." In *Security Studies*, pp. 23-34. Routledge, 2012. Walsh, James Igoe. "Is Technology the Answer? The Limits of Combat Drones in Countering Insurgents." *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics* (2018): 160-178.

One of the most prominent topics in the IR security studies is the application of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. Actors in IR have employed AI in different forms, like surveillance with the utilization of Surveillance Drone Systems (SDI) and Remotely Piloted Vehicles (RPV), and/or airstrikes through drone deployments like MQ-9 Reapers or Turkish Bayraktars.³ However, a specific type of these technologies has been put into action, particularly by the highest-ranking military powers in the world, which is Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).⁴ Other than the ability to even give a small state a complete air supremacy when needed, easy-to-deploy, cheap in material and human costs and charismatic nature of their ownership due to their cutting-edge technology made drones a highly preferred option compared to more traditional forms of armament.⁵ Military drones are expected to grow from 15.64 billion USD in 2024 to 33.61 billion USD in the following decade.⁶ While they represent a transformation in the way wars are fought, their appealing nature by non-state actors like terrorist groups and militant activists makes this military equipment more important for international relations and political science discussions. The role of UAVs can be scrutinized

from various perspectives. From their classifications, such as Lethal Autonomous Robots (LAR), to their ethical dilemmas, they pose in IR, their impact is undeniable as they define the decision-making processes of security policies. It is also highly contingent upon the level of autonomy that they have. Irrespective of the angle from which they are viewed, it cannot be argued that UAVs' deployment numbers are increasing, and both state and non-state actors are using them exponentially day by day. Indeed, some actors use these new toys more than others, and this level of usage seems to be dependent on the regime types and domestic cultural, historical, and authoritative legacies.

Even though the general sense emerges around the fact that there is an ongoing evolution in the war-making strategies, when it comes to certain countries, the accumulation of armed forces around unmanned vehicles (especially drones) is more commonly preferred over more conventional forms of arsenals. And there is a need to explain why some countries' tendencies lean towards these capabilities more than others do. Especially, countries with lower purchasing power prefer UAVs as their acquisition, operation, and

3 A Brief History of Drones | Imperial War Museums. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-brief-history-of-drones>.

4 "Global Firepower - 2025 World Military Strength Rankings." Global Firepower - World Military Strength. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.globalfirepower.com/>. Ernest, Nicholas, David Carroll, Corey Schumacher, Matthew Clark, Kelly Cohen, and Gene Lee. "Genetic Fuzzy Based Artificial Intelligence for Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle Control in Simulated Air Combat Missions." *Journal of Defense Management* 6, no. 1 (2016): 2167-0374

5 Modebadze, Valeri. "The Importance of Drones in Modern Warfare and Armed Conflicts." *KutBilim Sosyal Bilimler ve Sanat Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (2021): 89-98

6 Precedence Research. Military Drones Market Size, Share, and Trends, 2025 to 2034. Last updated May 29, 2025. Precedence Research. <https://www.precedenceresearch.com/military-drones-market>

logistics are more cost-effective.⁷ Additionally, drone technology simply makes military interventions more palatable as it lowers the political costs that may arise towards the domestic audience due to soldier deaths, which is a common incidence with manned aircraft and other forms of military equipment.⁸ Another reason behind this preference lies in the fact that drones prove themselves to be “apparatus of permanent watchfulness,” meaning their capability to be useful for policing, surveillance, and intelligence missions as well.⁹ Overall, the cumulative strategic advantage that these technologies provide is non-negligible and creates room for further discussion on how different states, governments, and regimes approach them.

As the elephant in the room, the US had been a pioneer player in the utilization of UAVs, both for the sake of its domestic and international policies and interests. The countries with a more limited area of interest in their own region, like Turkey and Israel, became much more eager to earn the same benefits by tracing the same pattern the US did. Put simply, the technological advancement UAVs possess can be interpreted as a part of the international competition over the ow-

nership of the supreme warfare capabilities. Replacing nuclear proliferation with drone proliferation as a contributing factor for the heads of state to search for prestige in the 21st century can facilitate our understanding of the growing appeal of drones.¹⁰ In doing so, domestic willpower to pursue such interests becomes an area of concern that can be addressed via the comparative method. The theoretical framework of the selectorate and domestic audience cost theories offers a promising approach to examining the evolution of the drone industry in Turkey. Investigating whether the decision to use UAVs with their lower economic costs is primarily influenced by domestic dynamics and calculations rather than being a direct response to an international arms race can be a strong explanation. Alternatively, discussions focusing on shared culture and history, commonly referred to as Neo-Ottomanism, propose a different angle on how AKP’s attempts to establish itself as a major regional power in the Middle East have attracted scholarly attention, too.¹¹ Furthermore, at the cost of facing the loss of domestic audience from Kemalist and secular oppositions, the Neo-Ottoman theoretical explanation reveals itself as adverse compared to the

7 Hudson, Leila, Colin S. Owens, and Matt Flannes. “Drone Warfare: Blowback From the New American Way of War.” *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 3 (2011): 122-132.

8 Boyle, Michael J. *The drone age: How Drone Technology Will Change War and Peace*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

9 Chamayou, GrŽgoire. *A Theory of the Drone*. New Press, The, 2015.

10 Horowitz, Michael, Joshua A. Schwartz, and Matthew Fuhrmann. “Who’s Prone to Drone? A Global Time-series Analysis of Armed Uninhabited Aerial Vehicle Proliferation.” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, no. 2 (2022): 119-142.

11 Albayrak, Didem Özdemir, and Kürşad Turan. “Neo-Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign Policy Through the Lenses of the Principal-Agent Theory.” *Journal of Security, Strategy and Political Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 129-154.

former one.¹²

By focusing on these two comprehensive approaches, the accelerating essentiality of armed drone production in Turkey will be laid out. To be able to do so, the initial effort will be given to demonstrate the emergence of UAVs as a leading element for both domestic and foreign policy of Turkey. Afterward, the explanatory capabilities of the two theoretical approaches will be put into question to reveal which one can actually hold the power to construe more. At the end, the contributions of the study and the ways of improving it even further will be discussed.

The Rise of a Middle Power: UAV Production Trend in Turkey

Turkey is striving to become a pioneer in its defense industry through a transformative approach that involves both state-centered initiatives and private sector investments. Over the past decade, this collaborative effort has significantly focused on the production capabilities within the country's defense sector, together with their exportation.¹³ By prioritizing domestic innovation and manufacturing, Turkey aims to enhance its strategic autonomy. This approach not only fosters te-

chnological advancements but also positions Turkey as an influential player on the global stage. As scholars like Kurç et al. have argued, since the American embargoes and political constraints on its military arsenal, Turkey's decisions regarding its defense industry had been shaped by its foreign policy goals to a great extent.¹⁴ One might argue that Turkey is gradually building a robust defense industry that aligns with its middle power outlook through these sustained investments and strategic partnerships.

On the lookout for prestige and success, the capabilities of the defense industries of Turkey gave birth to a variety of indigenous armed products.¹⁵ From the Cyprus issue to separatist terrorism, Turkey had kept its high levels of defense procurement through the 1990s while its fellow NATO countries kept their spending at all-time lows. Yet, the conflicting interests directed Turkey's management of arms inventories into isolationism, triggering homemade solutions in the upcoming decades. With strong companies involved in the process like Roketsan and Aselsan, which are defense production giants, the AKP government utilized booming FDIs and international funds to fulfill its commitment to geostrategic considerations through building a national and self-sufficient defense industry.

12 Gontijo, Lorenzo CB, and Roberson S. Barbosa. "Erdoğan's Pragmatism and the Ascension of AKP in Turkey: Islam and Neo-Ottomanism." *Digest of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 1 (2020): 76-91.

13 Yılmaz, Serdar, and Murat Yorulmaz. "The Effects of Turkish Defense Industry's Transformation on Turkish Foreign Policy." *İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi* 12, no. 1 (2023): 1-21.

14 Çağlar Kurç, Sıtkı Egeli, Arda Mevlütoğlu, and Serhat Güvenç, *Türkiye's Defence Industry: Which Way Forward?* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024).

15 Sıtkı Egeli, Serhat Güvenç, Çağlar Kurç, and Arda Mevlütoğlu, *From Client to Competitor: The Rise of Türkiye's Defence Industry* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies; Center for Foreign Policy and Peace Research; CATS Network, May 2024).

From missiles to tanks, the whole industry was built on the idea of self-sufficiency and national pride that were translated into political support for the ruling government. Yet a certain type of product portfolio gained more momentum than the others, carrying Turkey into a stronger place in the global arms trade discussion.

This upward trend of Turkey's can be interpreted clearly in Figure 1. While ambitions for defense industrialization were revitalized by larger defense budgets, the development of Turkish industrial capabilities was hindered in the 80s and 90s due to conflicts and competing strategies among the different actors involved in the decision-making process. The beginning of the 21st century meant exponentially growing investments and spending for Turkey. The strengthening of Turkish capabilities in defense and the rise in the number of locally produced systems have led to greater domestic popularity for the sector recently. With its products now viewed as symbols of success and national prestige, the sector arose as a normative consensus among deeply divided political poles as well. Parallel to the prevalent growing trend in the overall industry, UAV developments in Turkey were kicked off in 1990 and experienced a significant advancement in 2004.¹⁶ In 2004, the Undersecretariat of Defense Industries and the Turkish Armed Forces struck an agreement

with each other to produce "Anka," the first UAV to be entirely produced in Turkey. Anka's even control systems were domestically produced, with the project slated for completion in 2012. Although the "Anka" project encountered setbacks, Baykar Technologies continued the initiative by developing various other UAVs, such as the "Bayraktar" and "Malazgirt," as the most well-known ones. According to a document prepared by UDI in 2011, Turkey aims to become a leading player in the UAV market by 2030, with a strategic technological framework in place to support this goal.

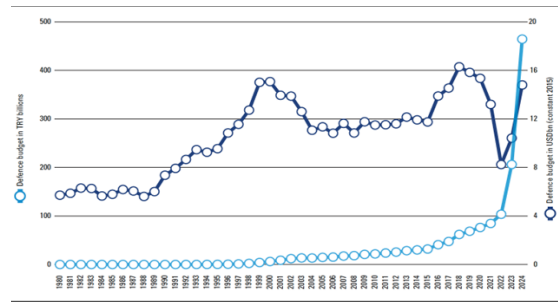


Figure 1: Türkiye: Defense Spending 1980-2024 (2024)¹⁷

Initially, the primary objective of this project was to enhance border security. Turkey's drone technology has become well-known for its active deployment in numerous recent conflicts, including those in Ukraine, the South Caucasus, Syria, and North Africa.¹⁸ The Russia-Ukraine war has been another recent

16 Kahvecioglu, Sinem, and Hakan Oktal. "Turkish UAV Capabilities as A New Competitor in the Market." *International Journal of Intelligent Unmanned Systems* 2, no. 3 (2014): 183-191.

17 NATO, Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence; Military Balance+; IISS analysis, cited in Sıtkı Egeli, Serhat Güvenç, Çağlar Kurç, and Arda Mevlütoğlu, *From Client to Competitor: The Rise of Türkiye's Defence Industry* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies; Center for Foreign Policy and Peace Research; CATS Network, May 2024), 6.

18 Jakoubek Stázista, Christopher. "Turkish 'Drone' Diplomacy - Security Outlines." *Security Outli-*

example in which their use was put in trial in combat. Two other notable examples of Turkish drone usage illustrate why many countries are now eager to acquire them. The first example is the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Azerbaijan-owned Turkish Bayraktar drones played a crucial role in destroying fortifications and attacking reinforcements behind the lines. They indeed enabled Azerbaijani forces to overrun the well-entrenched Armenian defenders. Open-source footage confirms that Bayraktar TB2s destroyed at least 500 Armenian vehicles. Remarkably, Turkish TB2s also managed to eliminate several of the latest technology defense systems.

Within the dataset that is provided by the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA), “Category IV: Combat Aircraft and Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle” must be looked into to observe the accelerating role that Turkey bears. As can be seen in Figure 1, UNROCA data demonstrates how Turkey has been playing a gigantic role in UAV exports since 2019, surpassing even the USA.¹⁹ This figure represents the import and export numbers reported by the importers and exporters for different types of armament, and although the numbers reported by the two parties do not always coincide with one another, the country-based analysis allows us to interpret whether there is an increasing volume of trade in certain types

of weaponry. In the case of Turkey, the data demonstrates that Turkey has been experiencing an accelerating trend, especially in “Category IV: Combat Aircraft and Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAV)”. When other sector leaders like China, Israel, and the USA are taken into consideration, the numbers clearly put Turkey ahead within this category. In other words, the world is experiencing a Turkish wind in the air when it comes to unmanned technologies.

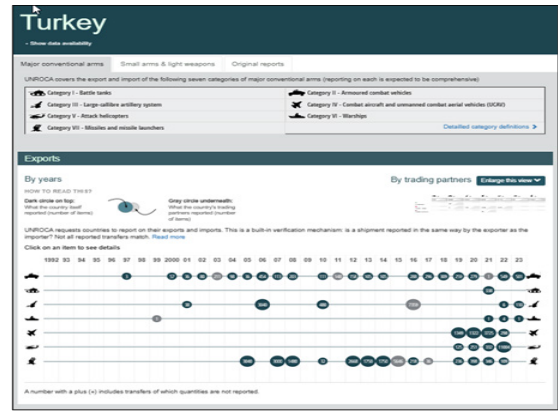


Figure 2: UNROCA Data on Turkey's Exports (2025)²⁰

At the same time, it is important to recognize that Turkey, as a strategic partner for Western powers, has focused on developing and distributing these modern military capabilities. While the role of UAVs in Turkish defense policies may evolve in the coming decades, their importance has been steadily increasing, but more crucially, “the ‘Turkification’ of the

nes - česko-slovenský portál o bezpečnosti, January 18, 2023. <https://www.securityoutlines.cz/turkish-drone-diplomacy/>.

19 “UNROCA.” ROCA (United Nations Register of Conventional Arms). Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.unroca.org/>.

20 “UNROCA.” ROCA (United Nations Register of Conventional Arms). Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.unroca.org/>.

defense industry lies at the heart of the government's legitimacy".²¹ Baykar's revealing of its \$ 1.8 billion revenue was made almost entirely from exports, supporting the company's place as one of the forthcoming aerospace and defense exporters of the country, with its major focus on UAVs.²² Baykar leading the way, Turkish UAV exports dominate the global market with its 65% share, as the company has delivered to more than 35 countries overall. This means Turkish drones became a pivotal tool in the two-level game of Turkey, impacting both domestic and international arenas in different areas of policymaking.

The slogan "a national tank, a national satellite, and a national airline" was reinforced by the "2023 Political Vision of the AKP". It demonstrates the 'moderate Islamic' dedication of the party to significant military projects. This focus is mirrored by a notable surge in military spending since 2006, driven by numerous major national defense initiatives launched by the AKP. The "hundred percent Turkish" Anka drone was also accompanied by other national militaristic capabilities like the "national" Altay tank and the Gökürk satellite, among others. Additionally, there has been an unprecedented international expansion of the armament sector, characterized by a diversification of partners and a significant

increase in exports. To comprehend the enormity of Turkish arms production and trade capabilities, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) can shed light on the subject through its available data. According to SIPRI yearly reports, Türkiye now ranks as the 11th top global exporter.²³ This arm exporting strength can be interpreted as how capable Türkiye's domestic defense industry is. The industry is proving to be capable of delivering most of the requirements of the armed forces and major systems.

Yet, it is no coincidence that TB2s and Akin-cis are sold to countries like Mali, Morocco, and Pakistan on the one hand, and 6 NATO members like Poland, Romania, and Croatia, on the other. The geographies that were once under the rule or impact of Ottoman ancestors, being the top-tier buyers of this meticulously choreographed armament trade, cannot be a coincidence. Yet, the rationale behind the Turkish government's strategy to be among the biggest arms suppliers to its political diaspora could be fed up by various reasons. This commitment had been serving as both a legitimizing tool and a means of morally fortifying the population.²⁴ Whether this legitimacy was continuously gained against Kemalist opposition or was a pursuit of Neo-Ottomanism is yet to be discussed.

21 Pinto, Anouck Gabriela Côte-réal. "A Neo-liberal Exception? The Defense Industry 'Turkification' Project." *Development Policy* 299 (2017).

22 Tim Guest, "Key Programmes Bolster Türkiye's Defence-Export Boom," *European Security & Defence*, July 21, 2025, Euro-SD, <https://euro-sd.com/2025/07/articles/45450/key-programmes-bolster-turkiyes-defence-export-boom/>

23 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). (2025). SIPRI Arms Transfers Database. Retrieved From <https://doi.org/10.55163/SAFC1241>.

24 Ateş, Hazal, Mehmet Nayır, and Safure Cantürk. "Parola: Büyük Ekonomi." *Sabah*, April 16, 2011. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/ekonomi/2011/04/17/parola-buyuk-ekonomi>.

An Explanatory Duel: Arguments for Domestic Audience Costs vs. Neo-Ottoman Ambitions

A theoretical bridge between domestic politics and international affairs can be constructed based on various theories to create a framework. One explanatory proposition can be found in the “two-level game” theory that suggests decision-makers/leaders are constrained by the conditions of both domestic and international levels.²⁵ Following the prior footsteps, Moravcsik introduced the concept of “double-edged diplomacy,” which incorporates domestic politics as an intervening variable that influences predictions and decisions at the systemic level.²⁶ This argument supports the idea that leaders’ concerns about audience costs drive their investments in advanced military technology. In other words, states that seek to invest and to advance their armament to minimize domestic opposition are actually addressing the desires or needs of De Mesquita’s winning coalitions and expanding Putnam’s win-set to avoid international

disputes and body-bag syndromes.²⁷

Therefore, the argument here is that these militaristic capabilities are central to the “Frontier” between domestic and foreign spheres.²⁸ They play a significant role in a leader’s decision-making process when considering involvement in armed conflict, as they influence both the outcome of the next election and the country’s international reputation. UAVs offer an alternative to traditional warfare, prompting leaders to adopt new decision-making strategies for engaging in international conflict as they are considering both domestic and foreign policy implications. This perspective suggests a correlation between being a less democratic state and possessing a higher number of drones, as decisions about drone usage will inevitably impact the international arena. While some scholars like Horowitz et al. find certain critical junctures like China’s entrance to the market further catalyzing non-democracies’ access to drones, the interrelationship between the ownership of UAVs and the regime’s accountability to their audience seems like a generally accepted notion within the literature already.²⁹

25 Putnam, Robert D. “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games.” In *International Organization*, pp. 437-470. Routledge, 2017.

26 Moravcsik, Andrew. “Introduction: Integrating International and Domestic Theories of International Bargaining.” In *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics*, pp. 3-42. University of California Press, 2023.

27 De Mesquita, Bruce Bueno, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow. *The Logic of Political Survival*. MIT Press, 2005.

28 Rosenau, James N. *Along the Domestic-Foreign Frontier: Exploring Governance in a Turbulent World*. No. 53. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

29 Horowitz, Michael, Joshua A. Schwartz, and Matthew Fuhrmann. “Who’s Prone to Drone? A Global Time-Series Analysis of Armed Uninhabited Aerial Vehicle Proliferation.” *Conflict Management and*

Whether considering selectorate theory or audience cost theory, both frameworks incorporate the notion of war into leaders' decision-making processes by helping us to understand their attitudes towards warfare technologies that might provide a strategic advantage. As Fearon initially posited in the context of audience cost theory, democracies are more likely than non-democratic regimes to engage in international armed conflicts.³⁰ Ultimately, leaders are the key decision-makers, and their actions impact not only themselves but also the citizens who must live with the outcomes of these decisions. Driven by this theoretical analysis, as the AKP government came into power in a democratic setting and preserved its reign through elections, its desire to utilize drones to avoid possible domestic audience costs can only make sense. Yet rather than seeing them as a defense mechanism and precautionary approach towards the opposition, drones may be interpreted as the neo-Ottoman tendencies of the party coming to the surface. Indeed, there might be confusion over interpreting these observations as simply results of Turkey turning into a regime type that is called as hybrid, semi-democratic, competitive authoritarianism or electoral authoritarianism. Yet rather than seeing domestic ideological drivers of regimes as mutually exclusive from regime types, this

study approaches them as two intermingled notions that reflect themselves as a single political output that might turn into either domestic or international policies. The uneven playing field with restricted civil liberties and personalization of power might be hints for identifying regimes as competitive authoritarian regimes.³¹ However, the overlapping characteristics of neo-Ottomanism and competitive authoritarianism do not necessarily undermine the explanatory strength of the study, if not empower it even more.

To understand the foundations of neo-Ottomanism, one must be patient in understanding the overlapping, if not identical, entities of Turkish identity on the one hand and Turkish national interests on the other.³² The reimagination of Turkish identity out of this dichotomy took place on a bridge between Western promises and organic ethno-nationalist and religious ties of the east. As laid out in Davutoğlu's 'Strategic Depth' as well, neo-Ottomanism emerges as the eagerness to become an impactful regional power through pragmatic ideology and ambitious plans.³³ The gradual dissociation from dependencies on foreign actors, owning responsibility as the guardian of suffering fellow Islamic nations, being the protector of the pre-Ottoman ethnic minorities, and penetrating further in

Peace Science 39, no. 2 (2022): 119-142.

30 Fearon, James D. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 577-592.

31 Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

32 Yavuz, M. Hakan. "Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo Ottomanism." *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East* 7, no. 12 (1998): 19-41.

33 Ivaylo, Hristov. "Neo-Ottomanism-Emergence, Ideology and Political Doctrine." *Social Evolution & History* 18, no. 1 (2019): 139-156.

western politics through strategic advantage can all be grouped under the notion of “pragmatic ideology and ambitious plans”. Overall, nothing better fits into this description than the defense capabilities that Türkiye has been slowly saving from American dependency and developing into a tool that can reflect its ideological ambitions through militaristic strength.

Throughout his rule, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has increasingly behaved like an Ottoman sultan, continually escalating conflicts with adversaries to maintain his “tough guy” image.³⁴ Fulfilling the prerequisites of neo-Ottomanism, the last 23 years under the AKP government can be defined as the biggest leap towards the theoretical premises of the idea, with rare diplomatic maneuverings as well. Although they do not necessarily align with his growing imperialist stance, yet, it can be said that he only let pragmatism take precedence over his imperialist ambitions when Turkey’s economic vulnerabilities were jeopardizing his chances of re-election. The former Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, formalized the concept known as the Strategic Depth doctrine that asserted that Turkey’s sphere of influence extended beyond geographical boundaries.³⁵ It encompassed historic connections throughout the region while positioning Turkey as the successor to the Ottoman Empire. Turkey under Erdoğan

has pursued a strategy aimed at restoring Ottoman influence by asserting control over its former imperial territories. This expansionist agenda encompasses geopolitical dominance across seas such as the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Red Sea. Erdoğan’s “Vision 2040” outlines Turkey’s aspirations for political, economic, and geopolitical leadership, reflecting a revivalist ambition reminiscent of Ottoman glory.³⁶ Turkey’s involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh War, which was dominated by Turkish drones in the armed conflict, enhanced its neo-Ottoman vision. Turkey’s foreign policy under Erdoğan has been marked by interventions in Libya, Egypt, and other regions during the Arab Spring, as well as military deployments and mercenary activities that have escalated regional tensions. In Libya, Turkey underpinned its economic interests, such as oil and natural gas extraction, which have sparked international condemnation and disputes with countries like Cyprus and Greece over maritime boundaries.

Following regional disputes, Turkey has strengthened its ties with Pakistan, Qatar, and Iran. This has led to increased defense, economic, and cultural cooperation, reinforcing Turkey’s strategic positioning in the broader Islamic and geopolitical arenas. Additionally, it is widely acknowledged that Kyiv has received substantial supplies of Turkish weaponry, particularly the ‘Bayraktar’ drones.³⁷ Indeed,

34 Bekdil, Burak. “Erdoğan’s Regional Charm Offensive.” *Middle East Quarterly* (2022).

35 Masuhr, Niklas. “Turkey’s New Outlook: Power Projection in the Middle East and Beyond.” In *Strategic Trends 2021: Key Developments in Global Affairs*, pp. 53-76. Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zürich, 2021.

36 Pattnaik, Jajati K., and Chandan K. Panda. “Interrogating Erdoğan’s Neo-Ottoman Geopolitical Imagination.” *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 8, no. 3 (2022): 338-355.

37 Gostev, Aleksandr, and Koba Liklikadze. “Analysis: Erdoğan Hoping Russian Invasion of Uk-

there is a reason why Ukrainians wrote a song for Turkish drones. All of these strategic moves substantiate the idea that AKP might be pursuing these intensive investments in armament technologies like drones to restore Ottoman glory.³⁸ Without any doubt, they can be translated into power and memory-building that will invoke the middle power role of Türkiye. Among those regional disputes, certain ones outshine others in terms of the impact that drones have had in making Türkiye's ambitions actualized as the grandchild of the Ottoman Empire. The 2020 Syria operations were applauded due to the enormous success of drone operations. Likewise, Azerbaijan's success would not have been possible without the use of TB2s, as many new channels and social media videos have demonstrated over and over again.³⁹ The ability of the Turkish government to pick and choose who can import its military success and technology speaks for its ideology on its own. Using drone manufacturing as a pivotal foreign policy asset, the AKP government might well have been killing two birds with one stone.

Discussion and Conclusion

Turkey's military activism and success in the defense industry over the past decade can be perceived as stemming from significant stru-

ctural and technological investments by the state and civilian authorities. The technological infrastructure of the Turkish armed forces has been developed with national resources, through foreign cooperation, and those purchases from abroad. Global developments in the armament industry, especially UAVs, are dynamic and closely linked to radical changes in military technologies. In this case, Türkiye's national strategy on the drone industry integrates its national interests that can be nourished with two wide literatures. On the one hand, the idea of extending military might through investments in armed drones and generating economic benefits as a result to extend winning coalitions in domestic politics and to avoid domestic audience costs at home presents itself as a strong argument. Within the framework of the domestic audience costs theory, UAVs provide a third option for leaders in democracies, as they did for Erdoğan under the AKP government. The possession, trade, and use of this technology do not clearly signal the start of a full-scale war or a complete retreat. Thus, UAVs blur the lines and allow these leaders to maintain political survival despite audience costs that might emerge from Kemalists, Kurds, or any other opposition to the government. On the other hand, earlier AKP foreign policy can be characterized by an expansionist and pan-Islamic approach, as it mainly focused

raine Can Bolster Turkish Regional Power." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, April 30, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-erdogan-russia-regional-power/31828327.html>.

38 Yavuz, M. Hakan. "Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a Post-National Vision." *Die Welt des Islams* 56, no. 3-4 (2016): 438-465.

39 Soyaltin-Colella, Digdem, and Tolga Demiryol. "Unusual Middle Power Activism and Regime Survival: Turkey's Drone Warfare and Its Regime-Boosting Effects." *Third World Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2023): 724-743.

on cooperation with Muslim states.⁴⁰ Turkey sought to enhance its regional role through political-economic and cultural influence in the Middle East, Africa, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. However, others argued that AKP's emphasis on the Ottoman legacy is not merely an Islamization or Sharia project but rather an effort to balance and expand the scope of neo-Ottomanism. Indeed, this paper does not dwell on the differences between the definitions of Ottomanism and neo-Ottomanism. Regardless of such a variation, they eventually utilize similar means in the end, and armed drones are just one of these means for the AKP government.

The successes within defense industries, especially in unmanned categories, have led to a complex dynamic in domestic politics for Turkey. Although the existence of ethical and legal shortfalls of unmanned technologies provides a powerful angle that can be used against the AKP government, opposition parties are having a hard time openly criticizing these technological advancements that symbolize nationalist pride and power projection in international relations, as those circumstances may be beneficial for their ends as well.⁴¹ This duality leads to an indeterminate and ambivalent posture of Turkish opposi-

tion, leaving them incapable of producing a counterargument. The intense usage of these technologies, particularly against the terror problem on the southeastern border of Turkey, has substantially prevented further loss of Turkish soldiers' lives in the region. Moreover, this notion alone has surpassed other potential arguments on collateral civilian life damages or violation of international human rights as well. Still, it is important to note that the leading opposition party, CHP's former president Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and others have criticized the AKP government, due to a lack of parliamentary audits, transparency towards the public, and accountability when it comes to defense industries.⁴² Notwithstanding, this rapport with opposition and critiques demonstrates how powerful UAVs are for Turkish domestic politics, as they preclude hostility towards the government, eventually contributing to a consensus and respect in the international arena.

Whether one of these theoretical approaches proposes a stronger argument over the other one is still open to further debate. As these theories also differ in terms of their unit of analysis, there might not be such a preference at the end as well. Yet, I believe that both of the theories hold significant explanatory

40 Ozkan, Behlül. "Turkey, Davutoglu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism." *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2014): 119-140.

41 Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, "Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kılıçdaroğlu Kocaeli'de: Savunma Sanayii Milli Meseledir; Sağcısı, Solcusu, Ortacısı Olmaz," CHP.org.tr, 30 Nisan 2023, <https://chp.org.tr/haberler/cumhurbaskani-adayi-kilicdaroglu-kocaeli-de-savunma-sanayii-milli-meseledir-sagcisi-solcusu-ortacisi-olmaz>.

42 Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, "CHP Lideri Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan SİHA Tepkisi: 'Türkiye'nin Egemenlik Haklarına Bir Başka Ülkenin Müdahalesini Kabul Etmiyoruz,'" CHP.org.tr, 3 Kasım 2022, <https://chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-lideri-kilicdaroglundan-sha-tepkisi-turkiyenin-egemenlik-haklarina-bir-baska-ulkenin-mudahalesini-kabul-etmiyoruz>.

power when it comes to UAVs at different levels. That is why each theoretical explanation must be extended with the sole focus on each of them to elaborate whether one might take a step further and attain deeper clarification. As Turkey marks its one-hundredth anniversary, armed drone exports have been a pivotal component in Turkey's emergence as a leading middle power that is "increasingly influential, self-confident, and independent".⁴³ To navigate through this new era, where middle powers play a more significant role on the global stage, it ought to be our responsibility as political scientists to discover what encourages them to trail behind such passions. To that end, the abovementioned two theoretical approaches have been quite elucidative to underpin the drone trend that seems to be a show of force for Turkey at all levels. What seems to be started as a source of fear out of seeking independence and protection turned into a tool that allows for both domestic and international flexing of Turkish wing muscles.

The overall picture may allow us to conclude that these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While audience cost theory takes into account two different levels of analysis, neo-Ottomanism can be traced at both levels as well. In the case of Türkiye and the defense capabilities that are especially prevailing with drones seem to be compatible with both theories. The intermingled interpretation that is capable of finding the neo-Ottoman discourse, path-dependency

within domestic politics, and how militaristic export capabilities serve both of these former notions can allow us to see the consequences at the international level. Acting as the middle and regional power by relying on the legitimacy that is provided by domestic politics, and historical roots can help us understand Türkiye's ambitions in international relations. Rather than choosing one over the other, the application of neo-Ottomanism to domestic audience cost theory can be an alternative yet strongly explanatory theoretical approach in the end.

43 Dost, Pınar. "The West Must Learn from Turkey's Transformation from the Ashes of the Ottoman Empire to a Rising Middle Power." Atlantic Council, November 2, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/the-west-must-learn-from-turkeys-transformation-from-the-ashes-of-the-ottoman-empire-to-a-rising-middle-power/>.

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