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*Israel's Eastern Mediterranean Strategy:
Energy, Security And Geopolitical Balances*

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**TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN 2020S:
 DESIGNED FOR A “GENTLE GIANT”?**

Emre KALAY*

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Abstract

This study tries to find a pattern through the stance of Türkiye against those challenges with the case study method. Four prominent cases of Turkish foreign policy, namely the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, the War in Ukraine, Türkiye-Syria relations, and the Eastern Mediterranean Question, came under scrutiny. It was identified that in all four cases, Türkiye utilized its hard power components in various ways, ranging from producing and providing military equipment to one side of the conflict to conducting extraterritorial military operations, but it also made efforts not to make enemies or threaten and alienate the concerned countries. After the appropriate way of utilizing hard power instruments, Türkiye sent messages and made efforts towards peace and prosperity in the region. By doing so, it tried to ensure the countries in question that Türkiye has no interest in further violent conflict or the ambition to violate their sovereignty.

Keywords: Turkish Foreign Policy, Hard Power, Regional Power

* Assist. Prof. Dr., Trakya University, Keşan Yusuf Çapraz School of Applied Sciences, ORCID: 0000-0002-5068-0791, emrekalay@trakya.edu.tr

2020'lerde Türk Dış Politikası: “Nazik Bir Dev” mi?

Öz

Türkiye 2020'lerde bazı önemli dış politika meseleleriyle karşılaşımıştır ve politika yapıcılar bunlarla baş etmek üzere uygun politikalar geliştirmek zorunda kalmışlardır. Bu çalışma da karşılaşılan zorluklara karşı Türkiye' nin duruşunu analiz ederek bir örüntü bulmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu amaçla dört önemli dış politika olayı, Dağlık Karabağ sorunu, Ukrayna Savaşı, Türkiye-Suriye ilişkileri ve Doğu Akdeniz meselesi incelemeye alınmıştır. Bu dört vakanın hepsinde Türkiye' nin, çatışan taraflardan birine askeri ekipman üretmek ve sağlamaktan sınır ötesi operasyon düzenlemeye kadar değişen şekillerde sert güç unsurlarını kullandığı fakat bunu yaparken düşman edinmemek, hiçbir tarafı tehdit etmemek ya da yabancılardan yardım istemek adıma da çaba gösterdiği tespit edilmiştir. Vakaya uygun şekilde sert güç unsurları kullanıldıktan sonra Türkiye tarafından barış ve istikrara yönelik mesajlar verilmiş ve böylece daha fazla şiddet içeren çatışma ya diğer ülkelerin egemenliklerini ihlal etmek gibi bir isteği olmadığı konusunda güvence verilmeye çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk dış politikası, Sert Güç, Bölgesel Güç

Introduction

Turkish foreign policy faced some major challenges in its region in the 2020s. The first one was the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Then came the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It was followed by the Israel-Hamas War of 2023 which quickly escalated and turned into a multi-front war. Meanwhile, the unrest in Syria could not be concluded and the Eastern Mediterranean Question stood still. So how was Turkish foreign policy designed to face these developments in its near neighborhood? The main contention of this study is that Turkish foreign policymakers have been designing and utilizing a profile that can be called a “gentle giant”. The definition of the gentle giant is “a person or animal that may seem intimidating because of great size, strength, talent, influence, etc. but is surprisingly friendly and not aggressive or threatening (Dictionary.com, n.d.). So this study asserts that Turkish foreign policymakers have been designing and trying to implement foreign policy goals under the consideration that Türkiye is a powerful state with significant capabilities for changing the

course of events and will not refrain from involving in the developments occurring in its milieu using its hard power instruments if necessary –this is the “intimidating” part-. Türkiye not only has national interests and goals but also has the power to achieve these interests and goals. Yet Türkiye’s power is not a threat to the neighboring countries’ sovereignty rights –this is the “friendly and not aggressive or threatening” part-. This study tries to display the traces of this kind of design of Turkish foreign policy through selected cases in the 2020s. The most convenient method to do this is the case-study method. So 4-four prominent cases of Turkish foreign policy, namely Nagorno-Karabakh issue, the War in Ukraine, Türkiye-Syria relations, and the Eastern Mediterranean Question are going to come under scrutiny to test this proposition: Turkish foreign policy towards these cases is designed by the thinking that Türkiye has the power to orient the developments in those issues according to its agenda, but that must be done without making enemies or threatening and alienating the concerned countries. Türkiye should not refrain from employing its hard power instruments, but that does not necessarily mean getting involved in armed clashes. Those instruments can be used in various ways, displaying Türkiye’s power, and the concerned parties can be induced to collaborate with Türkiye because it would benefit everyone.

Türkiye has faced some significant foreign policy challenges in the 2020s, and the policymakers had to develop appropriate policies to tackle them. There are numerous academic studies, commentaries, columns, etc., about Türkiye as a rising power in the last 2 decades. They mostly address the issue within the popular concepts like “regional power”, “middle power”, “emerging power”, and others. For example, Hasan Basri Yalçın, in his 2012 work, asserts that the middle power concept is useful for understanding the activism of Turkish foreign policy in the Justice and Development Party era (2012). Turkey: A Regional Power in the Making, edited by Kenan Aksu in 2013, takes in account some important topics like energy, identity, as well as Türkiye’s relations with the EU, the Middle East, Pakistan, China, and South Korea, acknowledging Türkiye as a regional power (Aksu, 2013). Tayyar Arı and Omar Munassar discuss, in their 2020 work, Türkiye’s seeking a regional power status in the Middle East (Arı and Munassar, 2020). Emel Parlar Dal “attempts to understand Turkey’s regional power together with its rising power status using an integral approach”, in her 2016 paper (Parlar Dal, 2016). What makes the study at hand important is that this study differs from the mentioned works and other works like them in two

ways. Firstly, this study is up to date. Second, it does not seek to analyse Turkish foreign policy within the above-mentioned concepts, but it seeks to find patterns through the selected cases

Turkish Foreign Policy in 2020s: Back to Realism?

Turkish foreign policy designed in the 2020s resembles power politics more than in previous years. In the early years of the 2000s, Türkiye went through drastic transformations. Justice and Development Party's (JDP) coming to power after the 2002 elections led to serious changes in domestic and foreign policy areas. The legislative changes for aligning with the European Union (EU) acquis undoubtedly caused a crucial transformation process in Türkiye. The EU's decision in 2005 to start negotiations with Türkiye opened a new chapter on Westernism in Türkiye and Türkiye's Western identity started to be accentuated. Türkiye's contribution amongst other Western countries to the mission in Afghanistan after 9/11 was very welcomed. The rejection of the 1 March motion which would lead Türkiye to involve in the 2003 invasion of Iraq if it was accepted, was also applauded by most of the EU members. Meanwhile, important developments occurred regarding the Cyprus Issue, one of the most important topics in Turkish foreign policy. Türkiye endorsed the Annan Plan which could end the Cyprus issue for good if the referendum held in the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus did not reject the plan. The launching of the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative by Türkiye and Spain was another reason to appreciate Türkiye. Another important issue was the increasing weight of mediation efforts in Turkish foreign policy that went hand in hand with Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" policy (Güzeldere, 2023: 76) which suggested that Türkiye would end all the problems that was trying to overcome in its neighborhood (Özcan, 2012: 59). Türkiye undertook a mediator role in many cases including the 2003 Iraqi crisis, the Israeli–Syrian talks in 2008–09, and the Israel–Hamas talks in 2009, participating in the Iran nuclear deal, peace talks in Afghanistan, Burma, and Somalia, and talks between Serbia and BiH, taking a seat in the 'Friends of Mediation' initiative (Parlar Dal, 2016: 1438). The relations with Armenia, another longstanding issue in Turkish foreign policy, witnessed radical changes starting in 2008 and culminating in the Zurich Protocols in 2009. Yet Armenian officials first suspended the ratification of the protocols in 2010 and then nullified them in 2018. What also contributed to the "good international citizen"

image of Türkiye was the emergency humanitarian assistance to many countries to tackle humanitarian crises across the globe.

Türkiye adopted and employed a moral discourse towards Arab countries after the start of the Arab Spring. Erdoğan called on Bashar Assad to resign several times over the turmoil in Syria and the mass killings of Syrian people. Türkiye-Syria trade nearly stopped. The Free Trade Agreement enacted in 2007 between the two countries was suspended in 2011. Türkiye gave support to Syrian dissidents against the Assad regime. Erdoğan called Assad a “murderer” on many occasions. A similar approach against Egypt was employed and after the coup that toppled Morsi in 2013, Türkiye fiercely criticized the Egyptian military officials. Diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Egypt reduced to the level of charge d'affaires. Erdogan labeled Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the new president of Egypt a “tyrant” and a “killer”.

This study contends that the above-mentioned moderate and moral image of Türkiye was slightly overshadowed by a new one through the drastic changes starting in roughly 2020s. The new image seems to be more fitting in the framework of realism as Türkiye has been utilizing the power components for reaching foreign policy ends. It can be seen that Türkiye has been pursuing its national interests and not refraining from utilizing its hard power instruments to accomplish them. What makes this study call 2020s Turkish foreign policy a gentle giant is that while Türkiye actively uses its hard power instruments to achieve foreign policy ends, it strives to do this without threatening the sovereignty rights of neighbor countries and the stability in the region. Türkiye is trying to present itself as a powerful, yet peaceful player in the region. That is what a gentle giant does. It makes sure that everyone knows it has great power and it can use its power when necessary yet this will not be to the detriment of others. So it is best for everyone to get along with the gentle giant.

Does Türkiye have such power?

Although it is a central concept in international relations (IR) discipline, there is not a common concept of power that has universal acceptance. So there are many definitions and explanations of power in IR (Schmidt, 2005: 523-549). This study does not include a discussion on the concept of power as it falls outside the framework and goals of the study. Yet, what is meant by “power” must be clarified before further investigation. Hans Morgenthau, one of the founders of the Realist School, defines political power as “a psychological

relation between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised. It gives the former control over certain actions of the latter through the influence which the former exert over the latter's minds" (Morgenthau, 1954: 26-27). Merriam-Webster dictionary defines power as the "ability to act or produce an effect", "possession of control, authority, or influence over others" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Oxford Learner's Dictionaries' is also similar to this: "the ability to control people or things" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.).

Realist School argues "that power is the sine qua non of international politics..." (Schmidt, 2005: 524) and "the close relationship that exists between the realist school and the concept of power stems from its basic insight: conflict and competition are intrinsic to the practice of international politics" (Schmidt, 2005: 526). From this point of view, a state must have the power to reach its goals because conflict and competition with other states are inevitable. Does Türkiye have the power to prevail in that kind of conflict and competition and to reach its goals? In IR, a general tendency equals a state's power over its material resources which include the state's military power, gross national product, population, size of land, etc. Compared to the other states in the region, Türkiye has significant advantages in those terms. In 2024, Türkiye has the 17th highest gross domestic product in the world. That makes it the 2nd biggest economy in its region falling only behind Russian Federation (International Monetary Fund, n.d.). It ranks 8th in the World in terms of the Global Firepower Power Index, only to be surpassed in its milieu by the Russian Federation (World Population Review, n.d.). In terms of population and the size of land, Türkiye ranks 4th (Worldometer a, n.d.) and 5th (Worldometer b, n.d.) respectively among its neighbors. Even if some other indicators are to be applied to compare Türkiye to the countries in its near circle, similar results would occur. In sum, Türkiye has remarkable power components in its region to make it a regional power.

There is a vast literature on regional powers and their roles in international politics. Other conceptualizations of states that have significant power and influence in their regions, such as middle powers, emerging powers, emerging middle powers, etc. (Delgado-Caicedo and Guzmán-Cárdenas, 2023) exist, and many studies define Türkiye or investigate its role as a regional power (See Güzeldere, 2023; Gürzel, 2014; Parlar Dal, 2016). Robert Stewart-Ingersoll and Derrick Frazier define "regional powers as states who possess sufficient capabilities to project power throughout and who disproportionately influence the

security dynamics within their RSC [regional security complex]” (Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier, 2012:7) and they claim that “...regional powers possess the opportunity to pursue their own national interests in an effective manner with neighboring states, due to their advantage in relative power.” (Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier, 2012:6). Detlef Nolte and Luis L. Schenoni, referring to Destradi and Schenoni, states that there is a consensus in the literature on two elements of a regional power: “belonging to a region, and having a larger share of the region’s capabilities when compared to second-tier states” (Nolte and Schenoni, 2024: 42). They also articulate that “the concept of regional power refers to a superiority in capabilities, which is at least implicitly recognized by other states in and beyond a region as structurally determining a regional power’s higher social standing” (Nolte and Schenoni, 2024: 41). Emel Parlar Dal discusses Türkiye’s regional power status in regions of the Middle East, the Balkans and the Black Sea and Caucasus in her 2016 study applying Daniel Femes’s regional power framework to Türkiye (Parlar Dal, 2016: 1425-1453) and concludes that Türkiye’s regional influence declined regarding recent regional and global crises. Yet, Türkiye was still considered a regional power. (Parlar Dal, 2016: 1445-1447) This study contends that developments in the Middle East and the Black Sea and the Caucasus in the 2020s led to an increase in Türkiye’s regional influence and Türkiye was able to boost its regional influence with its power elements; especially hard power elements. Nevertheless, Türkiye’s utilizing hard power instruments was not aimed at aggression towards its neighbors and stability in the region but at its foreign policy interests which are compatible with the peace and stability in the region.

Türkiye During and After the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

Türkiye was one of the earliest countries to recognize Armenia after its declaration of independence in 1991. After that, Türkiye made efforts, like inviting Armenia as a founding member of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, towards the integration of Armenia into the international community. But Armenian aggression towards Azerbaijan culminated in the eruption of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in 1992. Armenian invasion of Azerbaijan territory led to the backstepping in establishing diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Armenia. Moreover, Türkiye shut down the border crossing between Türkiye and Armenia in 1993. The invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh remained a central issue in the relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan and Türkiye and Armenia. Türkiye gave

constant support to Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and made it clear that the normalization of bilateral relations with Armenia was tied to the resolution of the conflict (Aydin, 2004: 400-406).

Turkish and Armenian officials made some attempts in the 2000s to install some level of contacts. These attempts were followed by some non-governmental organizations and business circles. Turkish president Abdullah Gül went to Yerevan on the invitation by his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sargsyan to watch the football match between the two national teams. The rapprochement between the two countries continued and paved the way for the signing of the Zurich Protocols. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan monitored the moderating relations between Türkiye and Armenia with solicitude and raised its concerns on many occasions (Aydin, 2013: 463-531). The Zurich Protocols turned out to be a failure when Armenia suspended and then nullified the protocols in 2010 and 2018 respectively. After the failure of talks between the two countries in 2009, Türkiye stated that formal ties would not be installed unless Armenia abolished the invasion of Azerbaijan soil (Taşbaş and Giragosian, 2022). This process shows that Türkiye wanted to normalize its relations with Armenia but the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh was a critical hindrance to normalization. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War gave the opportunity to change the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh and Türkiye-Armenia relations.

Turkey was actively involved in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War giving political, diplomatic, and military support to Azerbaijan. Türkiye and Azerbaijan have cooperated in the military field since an agreement between the two countries in 1992. The cooperation started with the education of Azerbaijan military staff and over time Türkiye has supplied significant amounts of military equipment to Azerbaijan's armed forces. As many admit Türkiye's military support was a decisive factor in Azerbaijan's victory in Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Turkish drones used by Azerbaijan forces played a huge part in the win. Azerbaijan's land forces could perform successful maneuvers thanks to the air support provided by Turkish drones (Rossiter and Cannon, 2022: 218). In addition, Turkish military officials' part in planning and commanding the operations on the ground surely had a direct effect in shifting the war in favor of Azerbaijan (Yalçınkaya, 2021; Taşbaş and Giragosian, 2022). Besides Türkiye did not rush to bring back the F-16s in Azerbaijan that were brought earlier for exercise as a message to other countries (Veliyev, 2023). In the bottom line, Turkish

military capabilities played a significant part in Azerbaijan's victory.

Armenian forces had to withdraw from occupied Azerbaijan territories after the certain defeat and Azerbaijan took control of a big portion of Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2023, Azerbaijan forces conducted military operations in the territories of what is left of the so-called Republic of Artsakh leading to the formal dissolution of the entity by 1 January 2024.

After the war, there has been a new wave of rapprochement between Türkiye and Armenia. Türkiye and Armenia agreed to improve relations in 2021 and appointed “Special Representatives for Normalization Process”. The handshake of Nikol Pashinyan and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan followed the rounds of meetings of special representatives in 2022. The Direct flights between Istanbul and Yerevan restarted and the two sides agreed on opening the shared border for third-country citizens and to commence air cargo trade between two countries in the same year (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs a, n.d.). The process witnessed a stall for a short time. Still, in July 2024 the special envoys convened at the border and discussed technical requirements to enable the functioning of the railroad border gate and the simplification of visa procedures between the two countries. Furthermore, they underscored the mutual will to resume the normalization process without any preconditions. (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs b, n.d.).

As seen above, Türkiye utilized its military power by assisting Azerbaijan throughout the war to get what it wanted and it worked. The Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh ended and Azerbaijan took control of the territory. Shortly after the win, Türkiye returned to politics to get what it wanted: the normalization of relations with Armenia. The process has not concluded yet, but it seems promising. Türkiye showed that it bears the power to change the course of events, yet the other countries –in that case, Armenia- should not fear as Türkiye does not intend any unnecessary collateral damage; on the contrary, Türkiye is willing to make efforts towards the good neighborhood relations, prosperity, and stability in its region.

Turkish Foreign Policy on the Russia-Ukraine War

Many agree that Türkiye is a key player in the Russia-Ukraine War. Since the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Türkiye raised its voice against the invasion declaring that it supports the

territorial integrity of Ukraine. When Russia started the invasion of east parts of Ukraine in 2022, it made it clear that diplomatic efforts alone cannot yield positive results. So while Türkiye offered facilitation efforts and diplomatic attempts on solving the issue, Türkiye also began to support Ukraine militarily. At the early stages war, Türkiye sold high amounts of drones to Ukraine which proved to be successful tools for Ukrainian army as they are used to slow down Russian advance in Ukrainian territory. The military support was not confined to drones export only. In 2020, a military cooperation agreement was signed between two sides declaring cooperation in joint construction of warships, drones, and all types of turbine engines. Two corvettes for Ukraine were launched –one in 2022 and the other in 2024- in Türkiye based on the agreement (Ozberk, 2024). Türkiye supplied engines for drones and other equipment in development from Ukraine. In addition, Türkiye built maintenance and production facilities in Ukraine. Some reports also mentioned a Turkish-Ukrainian joint plant in the latter (Rossiter and Cannon, 2022: 219).

Türkiye's military backing of Ukraine caused some criticism in Russia but Türkiye made serious efforts not to alienate Russia. Increasing trade volume and touristic activities of Russians to Türkiye were used to this end. Russia's Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in Türkiye and payments transferred to Türkiye for it were other factors contributing positively to Türkiye-Russia relations (Cagaptay, 2023).

So Türkiye, actively backing Ukraine and maintaining ties with Russia, has been trying to position itself as a neutral actor. Based on this Türkiye initiated some successful diplomatic efforts. Türkiye's mediation brought Ukrainian and Russian officials together in Antalya-Türkiye in 2022. This meeting was not as efficient as it was desired to be but shortly after that Türkiye managed to broker the "grain corridor" deal. Türkiye still continues to take steps in the direction of ending the war peacefully. Turkish president and minister of foreign affairs reiterated Türkiye's willingness to host a peace summit.

The aforementioned developments in this chapter display a foreign policy behavior alike the previous chapter. Türkiye has been utilizing its hard power tools; this time limited to production and supply to another country. In the meantime, Türkiye keeps diplomatic channels open and struggles to end the conflict peacefully which would be beneficial to Ukraine, Russia, Türkiye and the whole region.

Altering Stance against Assad Regime

Türkiye and Syria had good relations in general terms until the Arab Spring but after the Arab Spring spilling over Syria, Turkish foreign policy towards Syria altered drastically. Türkiye merged a new approach towards Syria on the consideration that Assad regime would eventually fall. When that happened, a power vacuum would emerge that Türkiye should take a part in filling it. So Türkiye began to support the dissidents in Syria against Assad regime. Inherently, Bashar Assad adopted anti-Türkiye stance. President Erdogan called Assad to resign several times and Türkiye acted fast to comply with the Arab League's decision on sanctions against Syria. Bilateral relations hit the lowest point since 1998 (Yeşilyurt, 2013: 420-421).

The uprisings started in Syria in 2011 and escalated into a civil war. Despite the significant support from Russia and Iran, Assad lost control over some parts of Syria. Several militia organizations emerged during the turmoil and took control of different territories of Syria. Some of the groups that settled in and gained dominance in northern parts of Syria caused distress in Türkiye. Islamic State (IS) and other jihadist groups that prevailed in northern Syria were responsible for several terrorist attacks in Türkiye. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) which has ties to Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was also very active in northern Syria and had backup from the US-led coalition as a part of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against IS. PYG gaining control of northern Syria was not in Türkiye's best interest so Türkiye backed other opposition groups. Syrian National Army (SNA) –formerly Free Syrian Army (FSA)- was the predominant receiver of Turkish military, political and logistic support.

Türkiye's involvement in the Syrian civil war has not been confined to supporting one belligerent front. Türkiye also carried out cross-border military operations in northern Syria starting with Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016 which was followed by Operation Olive Branch in 2018, Operation Peace Spring in 2019, Operation Winter Eagle, and Operation Claw Sword in 2022 since Türkiye has been defining Deash (IS) and YPG as threats to its national security and regional and international peace (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs c, n.d.). The Directorate of Communications of Presidency Republic of Türkiye justifies cross-border military operations by pointing out the prevention of penetration of terrorists and new fluxes of migration to Türkiye and maintaining regional peace and security on the legal basis of the right to self-defense as outlined in Article 51 of the UN Charter (Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of

Communications, 2023: 85). While carrying out military operations Türkiye participated in and supported diplomatic initiatives such as Geneva Process, Astana Platform, and Constitutional Committee to find a peaceful solution to the Syria conflict.

The climate started to change when officials from both sides met in 2023. Although the meetings did not yield any fruit, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reiterated several times his will to meet Bashar Assad on the normalization of bilateral relations in 2024 (Presidency of The Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2024). That process fits in the pattern. Türkiye puts its hard power instruments in use -in this case militarily backing groups that are in Türkiye's best interest and conducting cross-border military operations-, to alter the trajectory of events to fit Türkiye's interests then resorts to diplomacy to end the violence that will be beneficial to Türkiye, Syria and the broader region. Some assess the presence of Turkish forces in Syria as an invasion or a breach of Syria's sovereignty rights but this may not be necessarily true because Turkish military operations in Syria are not directed at the legal government of Syria but at the illegal and terrorist organizations that Syrian government failed to tackle with. Türkiye does not intend to invade or annex any part of Syria, on the contrary Türkiye desires the regime to gain back control over the whole country and eliminate any illegal organization that poses a threat to Türkiye and Syria. That is why Türkiye did not hesitate to utilize its hard power on Syrian soil several times and accentuated the normalization in Syria and Türkiye-Syria relations.

The Eastern Mediterranean Question

Eastern Mediterranean has become a ground for a new geopolitical rivalry with the discoveries of hydrocarbon resources in the early 2000s. The adjacent states have seen the opportunity to exploit these new resources for their welfare and a brawl for having a fair share has begun. But attempts towards that end tangled the problematic issues that were already there. The contentious issues in the Aegean Sea between Türkiye and Greece have been extending to the Mediterranean and the Cyprus question has been petrified for decades.

Republic of Cyprus (RoC) or from Türkiye's perspective the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus (GASC) took early action upon the promises of Eastern Mediterranean and managed to sign delimitation of maritime boundary agreements with Egypt, Lebanon, and Israel in 2003, 2007, and 2010

respectively. Türkiye raised concerns over these agreements as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was also entitled to have the same sovereignty rights as GASC which were being neglected by GASC and other parties. Based on those agreements, GASC gave exploration and exploitation licenses to international companies like French TOTAL and Italian ENI. Shortly after Türkiye and TRNC signed a similar delimitation agreement in 2011. Likewise, TRNC gave licenses to the Turkish Petroleum Corporation- TPAO. The problem was that some of the maritime areas covered in licenses overlapped. That made Turkish and French-Italian ships confront each other in some cases in time. Bearing in mind that confrontation is highly likely Türkiye sent its search and drilling ships on the escort of naval ships.

In 2018 Turkish naval vessels blocked ENI's drilling activity in the disputed zone. Moreover, Türkiye utilized its navy to deter the GASC-licensed international companies from operating in the disputed waters. Türkiye continued to employ its naval forces as a means of deterrence in the following years. From 2020 to 2022 Turkish naval vessels showed presence in the disputed waters several times (International Crisis Group, 2023). After Türkiye deployed a survey vessel to disputed areas in 2020, Türkiye and Greece-France came to the brink of military confrontation. France sent some air and naval forces to the Mediterranean to display its support to Greece (Erdoğan, 2021: 79-80). Yet, none of the incidents that escalated the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean led to armed conflict.

The developments in the Eastern Mediterranean gradually led to the formation of a front excluding Türkiye. The necessity for cooperation on the potential that the Eastern Mediterranean carries brought GASC, Greece, Israel, Egypt, France, Italy, Palestinian Authority, and Jordan together paving the way to the establishment of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in 2019. Türkiye took action against the efforts to exclude it from the Eastern Mediterranean equation and warmed up relations with Libya. So Libya has become another aspect of the Eastern Mediterranean question. Türkiye and Libya signed an agreement on maritime delimitation which received harsh repercussions from the members of EMGF. Türkiye committed to assist the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) militarily against General Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA). On the grounds of that deal with Libya, Türkiye claimed “maritime areas west of the 28th meridian that overlap with waters Athens considers part of its continental shelf” (International Crisis Group, 2023: 22) and the deal “has been a strategic move that has acted as a

game-changer in the region's energy puzzle" (Erdoğan, 2021: 88). Surely Türkiye's military involvement in the Libyan civil war has been a game-changer. GNA survived the LNA threat and Türkiye gained an ally and a foothold in Northern Africa. As seen here, Turkish hard power instruments were utilized in the broader framework of the Eastern Mediterranean question.

Conclusion

As seen in the aforementioned cases, Türkiye does not refrain from utilizing its hard power components to influence the conjecture in its region in the 2020s. The utilizing of hard power instruments has different levels: producing and providing military equipment to one side of the conflict as in the Ukrainian case; in addition to producing and providing military equipment, providing technical assistance as in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and Libya; using military power to confront, standoff and deter other parties as in Eastern Mediterranean question and, conducting extraterritorial military operations as in Syria case. The different kinds of usage of hard power may seem controversial because hard power refers to coercion through military force. The Russian Federation has used and continues to use its hard power on several occasions, like the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 or its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its ongoing invasion of Ukraine starting in 2022. The skirmishes between India and Pakistan or airstrikes of the US and the United Kingdom on Yemen are other cases of hard power. Türkiye's mentioned hard power utilizations, apart from military operations in Syria, are clearly unlike them. Yet this study does not contend that all of these should fall in the hard power categorization. It contends that Türkiye has significant military capabilities, which are related to hard power, but Türkiye has been able to find ways to use its military capabilities in different forms. Turkish military elements are not in active combat in Ukraine, but the military assistance to Ukraine made a difference in the war. Türkiye did not fire a single arm in the Mediterranean, but Turkish naval forces' confrontation and acts of deterrence changed the conjuncture in the region. Turkish soldiers did not fight on the ground, but Türkiye's assistance to Azerbaijan helped to change the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Going back to the beginning, is it possible to mention a pattern in the selected cases? In the case of the war in Ukraine, Türkiye's military backing did not go any further than helping the Ukrainian defense. Furthermore, Türkiye endeavored to play the mediator role for the peaceful resolution of conflict. In Nagorno-Karabakh case Türkiye involved in the conflict on

Azerbaijan's side and did not aim at total annihilation of Armenia or any kind of unnecessary violence with a sense of retribution. After the satisfactory accomplishment Türkiye keenly initiated a new normalization process. In the Eastern Mediterranean question, Türkiye did not take the standoff and confrontation of foreign naval forces to armed conflict. In Syria case, Türkiye conducted military operations in Syrian soil but none of them were aimed at invasion or annexation of any part of Syrian soil. Besides Türkiye gave support to newly formed government of Syria. All these acts display the pattern in Turkish foreign policy: Use hard power instruments in a suitable way if necessary; when your agenda is met, do not go any further; do not threaten others and show your willingness for peace and common benefits.

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