

TÜRKİYE’S POST-COLD WAR STRAITS POLICY: BALANCING AUTONOMY

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Abstract

The Straits have served on a continuous basis between the Ottoman Empire and Republic periods as strategic factor in the balance of power within the international system. The system of the straits, established as a permanent legal entity under the 1936 Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, has formed a backdrop for Turkey’s sovereignty and foreign policy ever since. Yet the reorganisation by and through the change from Cold War to post-Cold War era has also altered the nature of this regime. This article develops and presents an analytical framework, “Balancing Autonomy”, developed by the author, which serves as an abstract deductive model by which to interpret the way middle powers can navigate systemic pressures through regime-based structuring while acting autonomously. Drawing on the tradition of classical, structural and neoclassical realism, this model captures the extent to which Turkey can accommodate systemic compulsions while coping with national decision-making autonomy. Applying a historical-comparative qualitative analysis based on archival and official sources, the article discusses three periods: 1991-2003, 2004-2013, and 2014-2024. The results show that the model functions through three major mechanisms: constraint through rule-based practices, legitimacy based on a cautious legal-rational discourse, and mediation through simultaneous diplomatic engagement. The study contends that Turkey successfully employed its natural capability and historical diplomatic tradition to ensure regional stability as well as national independence by treating the Montreux regime as a pragmatic mechanism. In this vein, the model on “Balancing Autonomy” provides a distinct theoretical framework to understand the presence strategies of middle powers in a multipolar system.

Keywords: *Turkish Straits, Montreux Convention, Turkish Foreign Policy, Regime-Based State Behaviour, Balancing Autonomy*

Öz

Türkiye’nin Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Boğazlar Politikası: Dengeci Özerklik

Boğazlar, Osmanlı Devleti ve Cumhuriyet dönemleri arasında kesintisiz bir şekilde, uluslararası sistemdeki güç dengelerinde stratejik bir faktör olarak rol oynamıştır. 1936 Montrö Boğazlar

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Sözleşmesi uyarınca kalıcı bir hukuki statü olarak tesis edilen boğazlar sistemi, o tarihten bu yana Türkiye'nin egemenliği ve dış politikası için hukuki bir dayanak teşkil etmektedir. Ancak, Soğuk Savaş'tan Soğuk Savaş sonrası döneme geçişin getirdiği yeniden yapılanma, bu rejimin doğasını da değiştirmiştir. Bu çalışma, yazar tarafından geliştirilen ve orta ölçekli güçlerin özerk hareket ederken rejim temelli yapılandırma yoluyla sistemik baskıları nasıl yönlendirebileceğini yorumlamaya yarayan analitik bir model olan “Dengeci Özerklik” adlı özgün bir kavramsal çerçeve geliştirmekte ve sunmaktadır. Klasik, yapısal ve neoklasik realizmden yararlanan bu model, Türkiye'nin sistemik baskılara uyum ile ulusal karar alma özerkliğini eşzamanlı yönetme kapasitesini ifade etmektedir. Arşivsel ve resmi kaynaklara dayanan tarihsel-karşılaştırmalı nitel bir analiz uygulayan bu çalışma, 1991-2003, 2004-2013 ve 2014-2024 dönemlerini analiz etmektedir. Bulgular, modelin, “kural temelli uygulamalar yoluyla kısıtlama”, “ölçülü bir hukuki-rasyonel söyleme dayalı meşruiyet” ve “eşzamanlı diplomatik angajman yoluyla arabuluculuk” olmak üzere üç temel mekanizma aracılığıyla işlediğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, Türkiye'nin Montrö rejimini pragmatik bir mekanizma olarak ele alarak hem bölgesel istikrarı hem de ulusal bağımsızlığını güvence altına almak için içsel kapasitesini ve tarihi diplomatik geleneğini başarıyla kullandığını öne sürmektedir. Bu bağlamda, “Dengeci Özerklik” modeli, çok kutuplu bir sistemde orta ölçekli güçlerin varlık stratejilerini anlamak için özgün bir teorik çerçeve sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Türk Boğazları, Montrö Sözleşmesi, Türk Dış Politikası, Rejim-Temelli Devlet Davranışı, Dengeci Özerklik*

Introduction

The Straits¹ question has been at the centre of the Ottoman Empire's diplomacy and international power politics since the late 18th century. The right of free trade passage granted to Russia by the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca undermined the Ottoman Empire's absolute sovereignty over the Straits and initiated the region's internationalization process. The 1841 London, 1856 Paris, and 1878 Berlin Conventions, signed throughout the 19th century, along with the secret treaties of 1915, demonstrated that the Straits had become a reflection of great power rivalry. Defeat in the First World War and the Allied occupation placed the Straits under direct international control and repositioned the region at the focus of great power diplomacy in the new post-war order.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which left the Straits to the supervision of an international commission, was a temporary arrangement for Türkiye, restricting its sovereignty. This very long historical process finally found its conclusion in the 1936 Montreux Straits Convention. It returned all of Türkiye's sovereign rights over the Straits, while overriding every one of the restraints on Lausanne and creating a legal regime that would be perpetual for the regime. From this period onward, the Straits became one of the most important strategic areas of continuity in Turkish foreign policy. Indeed, as seen in early Republican diplomacy, the link between military geography and sovereignty elevated the Straits to a position of unchanging priority. The new geopolitical landscape that emerged in the Black Sea basin with the end of the Cold War presented new challenges for Türkiye regarding the implementation of the Montreux regime. One of the earliest signs of this emerging geopolitical environment appeared during the 1992 Black Sea Fleet dispute between Russia and Ukraine. At the time, international media also underlined the decisive role of the Straits. *The Times* noted that the Black Sea has only

¹ In the study, the Turkish Straits are referred to as the “Straits”.

one exit and that this passage, regulated under the provisions of the Montreux Convention and administered by Türkiye, occupies a central place in the regional balance of power.² In fact, immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in January 1992, calls to open the Convention to debate arose, while Türkiye adopted a cautious policy of diplomatic observation in response to these calls. Turkish Foreign Ministry officials of the time formed the basis of this cautious stance by emphasizing that Montreux is the foundation of regional stability.³

The end of the Cold War not only dismantled the bipolar order but also qualitatively transformed the systemic constraints guiding states' foreign policy behaviours. The brief phase of unipolarity in the 1990s quickly gave way to a multipolar order characterized by the rise of regional power centres.⁴ This new search for balance recast the Black Sea and Straits basin as a competitive zone of increasing geostrategic importance. The security and legal certainty guaranteed by the Montreux Convention had formed the cornerstone of Türkiye's status quo policy during the Cold War, and this emphasis on stability continued to represent a centrepiece of its foreign policy in the post-Cold War period. Türkiye, a NATO ally and littoral to the Black Sea as well as regional power has the protection of its sovereign rights in the Straits among its foremost interests. The changing power equilibria thus directly challenged this regime's utility and Türkiye's own balancing ability.⁵

The first challenge came in the form of environmental security concerns raised by growing traffic of tankers during the early 90s. The main was the Nassia tanker accident in Istanbul Strait on March 15, 1994, which prompted Türkiye to re-evaluate her control regulations. Turkish Foreign Ministry officials responded that Türkiye has the sovereign right to enforce new rules for enhancing environmental safety, which they say are entirely consistent with Montreux convention requirements. Opinions reflected in the press that same day pointed to the unsustainability of oil transport in the Straits and the necessity of a regulation to increase safety within the Montreux framework.⁶ Indeed, during this period, in the face of increasing vessel sizes and traffic density reaching alarming levels, the need arose to make new regulations to ensure the safety of navigation, life, property, and the environment.⁷ This environmental crisis in consequently 1994 brought the Montreux regime onto the international diplomatic agenda. In fact, on May 14, 1994, Moscow officially objected to Türkiye's new traffic regulations. However, despite this objection, Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev's statement that "We do not want a new order in the Black Sea; Montreux is the basis of the existing balance" confirmed the Convention's importance for regional stability. The Turkish Foreign Ministry, in turn, reported that the new regulations were in full compliance with Montreux and aimed only at traffic safety.⁸

² *The Times*, Jan. 9, 1992, p. 7.

³ *Milliyet*, Jan. 11, 1992, p. 1.

⁴ Waltz, 1979, p. 88; Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 39.

⁵ Aldırmaz, 2025, p. 229-231.

⁶ *Milliyet*, Mar.15 1994, p. 1.

⁷ Özersay, 2015a, p. 587.

⁸ *Milliyet*, May. 14, 1994, p. 1.

In later years, developments such as the 2008 Georgia Crisis, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War, have necessitated an examination of Türkiye's decisions within a strategic and theoretical framework. At this juncture, the study focuses on the question of why and how the Straits regime has remained sustainable. To answer this, this article introduces and formulates an original conceptual model: "Balancing Autonomy." This model is developed as a framework for explaining the survival strategies of middle powers in the multipolar system. "Balancing Autonomy" refers to the capacity of a middle power's foreign policy to simultaneously manage adaptation to systemic pressures and its national decision-making autonomy.

The theoretical framework of this study proposes "Balancing Autonomy" as a multilayered sub-model of neoclassical realism. In this synthesis, the three realist layers play distinct roles: Classical realism as systematized by Hans J. Morgenthau, clarifies the prudential ethos (moderation and prudence) behind restraint.⁹ Structural realism, developed by Kenneth N. Waltz, specifies when the external incentives for balancing intensify.¹⁰ The model's operational link, however, is neoclassical: as Gideon Rose argues, systemic pressures are filtered through internal variables (such as internal capacity and strategic culture) to shape policy.¹¹ This integrated framework thus allows the study to analyse the continuity in Türkiye's strategy as a product of both external systemic pressures and internal domestic dynamics.

Within this framework, the study offers three main contributions. First, it provides a theoretically grounded historical assessment of the Straits policy by integrating the three realist approaches. Second, it comparatively examines the 1991-2003, 2004-2013, and 2014-2024 periods to analyse the dynamics of change and continuity in this behaviour. Third, and most significantly, it formulates the three core mechanisms of "Balancing Autonomy": restriction (rule-based implementation), legitimacy (a prudent legal-rational discourse), and mediation (simultaneous diplomatic engagement). Together, these contributions explain the "Balancing Autonomy" conceptualization on historical and empirical grounds.

Theoretical Framework and Balancing Autonomy Model

Research on the Straits has generally focused on the evolution of the legal regime or the balance of power in the international system. However, most of these studies lack a holistic approach capable of explaining state behaviour within historical continuity. This article aims to fill this gap in the literature with an original model that supports the historical narrative with theoretical concepts.

The historical character of the Straits question is, in essence, based on great power rivalry, the struggle for sovereignty, and the search for systemic balance. Due to this nature, realism is the most suitable tool for constructing this original model. Therefore, realism is treated in this study not as an abstract theory, but as an interpretive tool for making sense of Türkiye's historical patterns of behaviour in its Straits policy. This

⁹ Morgenthau, 1948, p. 4-15.

¹⁰ Waltz, 1979, p. 88-93.

¹¹ Rose, 1998, p. 146-154.

study's synthesis of realism provides a multi-layered interpretation. The cautious diplomatic line that Türkiye pursued to preserve the Montreux regime is accounted for by the principles of moderation and prudence enshrined in classical realism. The systemic pressures on Türkiye resulting from the move toward multipolarity are addressed by structural realism. Neoclassical realist approach, on the other hand, shows how these pressures were intermingled and reshaped by intra-state filters like domestic political structure, bureaucracy, and leaders' understanding. The interplay between these external pressures and the internal capacity of the state is, accordingly, crucial to explaining the durability of the Straits question.

The Straits issue has been one of the most enduring strategic questions in Turkish foreign policy. From the end of the 18th century, from the first landmark at which weakening of Mediterranean dominance by Ottoman Empire narrowed into an international issue in 1774 (Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca), they were one of the important strategic lines for European balance on till 1841 London convention signed in the 19th century. Although the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne recognized Turkish sovereignty over the Straits in a limited manner, the 1936 Montreux Straits Convention abolished these restrictions and granted Türkiye full control rights. Thus, Montreux became not only a legal regulation but also the founding document of a diplomatic tradition based on the principles of power, balance, and moderation. Indeed, the Montreux regime, along with the 1923 Lausanne Straits Convention, has been cited among the historical examples of international straits management and has served as a model for similar strategic waterways.¹² The "Balancing Autonomy" model developed in this study is an approach nurtured by this historical continuity, representing the reinterpreted form of the strategic and mental legacy created by Montreux under the multipolar system conditions of the post-Cold War era.

This model is built upon a synthesis of these three realist layers. Table 1 summarizes how they interact to form the analytical foundation of the model. Classical realism provides the prudential and interest-driven logic behind Türkiye's consistent protection of the Montreux regime; structural realism explains how shifts in the international system alter the incentives for using Montreux as a balancing tool and neoclassical realism identifies the domestic filters that transform systemic pressures into concrete policy mechanisms. Together, these layers clarify both the continuity and variation of Türkiye's Straits policy in the post-Cold War era.

Table 1: Analytic Integration Summary of Realist Approaches in the "Balancing Autonomy" Model

Realist Approach	Core Assumptions	Application to the Turkish Straits	Contribution to the Balancing Autonomy Model
Classical Realism	International politics is rooted in human nature,	Türkiye's enduring commitment to Montreux reflects a prudential	Provides the normative foundation of Balancing Autonomy: measured

¹² Sokolski & Clawson, 2005, p. 258.

	prudence, moderation, and the pursuit of national interest (Morgenthau; Carr).	conception of power, status, and diplomatic restraint. It is this pledge that renders the Straits a continuing vital interest which must be prudently managed.	behaviour, restraint in crises, legal-rational discourse, preference for stability over adventurism.
Structural Realism (Neorealism)	State behaviour is shaped by the distribution of capabilities and systemic pressures (Waltz).	Unipolarity (1990s), soft multipolar transition (2000s), and competitive multipolarity (2014-) produce different incentive structures for Türkiye's Straits policy.	Explains why Balancing Autonomy varies across periods: systemic incentives push Türkiye to rely on Montreux as a low-cost, high legitimacy balancing instrument.
Neoclassical Realism	Systemic pressures are filtered through domestic politics, leadership perceptions, institutional capacity, and strategic culture. (Rose)	VTS modernization, naval capacity growth, bureaucratic expertise, leadership perceptions (post-2014 threat assessments) shape the intensity and form of Montreux-based balancing.	Grounds the mechanisms of Balancing Autonomy: regime-based restriction, legitimizing discourse, and simultaneous crisis mediation are possible due to increased domestic capacity and leadership interpretation.

The “Balancing Autonomy” model has a neoclassical realist logic to its causal structure. Its operational nexus is neoclassical insofar as systemic ones are filtered through domestic acts such as state-building, institutional capacity and leadership perception before being processed into the mechanisms of a regime-anchored limitation, legitimacy and mediation. The other two realist dimensions each offer separate, though similar, challenges: Structural realism specifies when the impetus for balancing from abroad rises and Declining prudential realism explains the treatise on which model's tendency toward self-restraint Political Realism is based. This article thus introduces “Balancing Autonomy” as a multi-layered sub-model within the neo-classical realist family, offering a mechanism-based, meso-level theory-building input.

The model's historical and empirical foundations are laid out in the author's doctoral dissertation titled *Changes and Debates in the Status of the Straits from Lausanne to the End of the Cold War (1923-1991)*. That document-based analysis of the 1923-1991 period established that the Montreux regime performed three core strategic functions in the foreign policy of the Republic of Türkiye: acting as a tool of sovereignty, a geopolitical balancing mechanism, and a multi-layered crisis management instrument. The “Balancing Autonomy” model presented in this article transforms these historical findings into a unified theoretical framework. The dissertation's “balance policy mechanism” provides the conceptual root for the “Balancing” aspect of the model; the “tool of sovereignty” maps directly onto the “Autonomy” component. The historical

crises examined in that work (e.g., 1946, 1962, 1974) are therefore reinterpreted as the model's primary stress tests.

"Balancing Autonomy" is conceptually defined as Türkiye's capacity to respond to international pressures by navigating the space between full compliance and full resistance. It is the ability to conduct flexible diplomacy during crises while simultaneously upholding the legal boundaries of the Montreux regime. This capacity relies on a balance management that simultaneously operates rule/institution-based restriction and mediation, adhering to the principle of moderation. The operation of this capacity depends on three minimum conditions: First, the existence of a context-specific, internationally recognized rule/institution anchor (Montreux in Türkiye's case; UNCLOS/IMO regimes or regional protocols in other contexts); second, the minimum internal capacity and decision-making coordination sufficient to operate this anchor; and finally, the possession of a diplomatic toolkit that allows for issue-focused differentiation while maintaining alignment with alliances during a crisis window. In this framework, "Balancing Autonomy" is not an absolute area of freedom (or full discretion), but the co-management of intra-systemic adaptation and resistance, with historical roots in the tradition of moderation established by Montreux. Thus, the "Balancing Autonomy" model represents the expanded and conceptualized form of the historical continuity developed as "sovereignty-based balance policy" in the author's doctoral dissertation. In this respect, the model, unlike singular interpretations of realism, addresses state behaviour within a dynamic rather than static process.

The "Balancing Autonomy" model also lends a new interpretation to realism's traditional struggle for power reading. This model does not conceive realism as a unilateral conflict theory but as a malleable terrain that is liable to evolving circumstances. Three fundamental ideas are at the heart of the model's consistency and operation. When all is said and done, power is contextual, not absolute; we understand it only in relation to the contingent balances of forces on the international system level. Second, systemic pressures are constraining but not deterministic; states can leverage these pressures through internal capabilities and historical experience. Third, autonomy is a combination of ability and strategic wisdom; diplomatic prudence is the minimum requirement for the survival of a country.

The "Balancing Autonomy" model draws to itself neither from standard resources of Turkish foreign policy definitions and models nor does it draw from contemporary international relations theories precisely because it moves beyond their cognitive limitations. It is not a concept of "active neutrality" or "balanced foreign policy." These are all fancy terms for a general diplomatic orientation, or passive posture in the absence of crisis. "Balancing Autonomy," in contrast, describes an actual mechanism grounded on specific legal devices (such as Montreux Art. 19–21) that requires active intervention (restriction and moderation) in a state of urgency. The model also sets itself apart from modern international relations concepts. Consider, for instance, the term "hedging," which is common in the literature and serves to suggest a means of managing uncertainty through ambiguity while at the same time involving contradictory moves. "Balancing Autonomy", however, does not work through ambiguity; it functions via clear rule/institution attribution, prudent limitation and in parallel mediation (and) it causes

intra-regime differentiation without departing from the alliance. In this respect, it departs from the passive tranquillity of “active neutrality” and the general orientation discourse of “balanced foreign policy.” Similarly, while “strategic autonomy” can rely on complete separation and high-cost directional changes, “Balancing Autonomy” produces intra-regime flexibility comprising restriction, mediation, and verification during crises, without decoupling from the alliance.

The model is thus specifically situated within middle power theory. In the broader literature, middle powers are defined as states that cannot reshape the systemic structure yet possess sufficient material and diplomatic capacity to pursue selective, independent strategic objectives.¹³ Their behaviour is commonly associated with a reliance on rule-based multilateralism, mediation, and niche diplomacy as instruments to manage systemic pressures without provoking great-power confrontation.¹⁴ This study argues that “Balancing Autonomy” represents a distinct, regime-anchored behavioural model that expands this traditional middle power toolkit by demonstrating how a state can employ legal-institutional instruments to both adapt to systemic constraints and generate calibrated forms of autonomy. In this context, Türkiye is analysed as a state that has developed a hybrid model beyond classic middle power behaviour one that produces a prudently autonomous actor type capable of combining intra-systemic adaptation with limited but strategic resistance mechanisms. This line deepened in the 2000s, thanks to the strengthening of institutional capacity and the diversification of the diplomatic toolkit; economic growth, localization in the defence industry, and diversification in energy policies have formed the material foundations of this autonomy.

At the core of the model lies the struggle for survival of middle powers within the system. For Türkiye, this struggle has been shaped by the legal boundaries of the Montreux Straits Convention and the security requirements of regional competition. Türkiye’s stances during crises (neutrality in the 2008 Georgia War, prudence after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the strict implementation of Montreux in 2022) are different historical forms of the same strategic line. “Balancing Autonomy”, in this regard, defines the ability of middle powers to protect their national interests while remaining in alignment with the system, transcending the classic dependent or independent foreign policy categories.

Although this study demonstrates the “Balancing Autonomy” concept through the case of Türkiye via Montreux, as stated at the outset, the model is not dependent on a single treaty. Montreux is the case-specific “regime-based instrument” used in the Turkish case. The distinctive logic of the model, rather than being tied to a specific treaty, rests on a general mechanism comprising a rule/institution anchor, restriction, mediation, and verification. In this respect, the Turkish case exhibits a Montreux-based subtype of “Balancing Autonomy”; however, the model can also operate without Montreux and possesses a generalizable quality in other middle power contexts where recognized rule/institution foundation exist, such as UNCLOS (1982 United Nations Convention on

¹³ Holbraad 1971, p. 78-79.; Chapnick 1999, p. 73-74.

¹⁴ Cooper et al., 1993, p. 19-25.; Cooper 1997, p. 5-12.; Ravenhill 1998, p. 309-312.

the Law of the Sea), IMO (International Maritime Organization) regulations, or other regional cooperation frameworks.

Methodology and Data

This study employs a historical-comparative qualitative method to analyse the evolution of Türkiye's Straits policy in the post-Cold War era and to assess how the Montreux regime functions as the core instrument of the "Balancing Autonomy" model. The methodological design rests on three complementary components: a periodized historical reconstruction, a mechanism-based analytical framework, and the use of diversified primary and secondary sources.

The analysis assumes three waves, or periods, organized around the features of the global system as it had been going through its main phases: unipolar dominance throughout 1990s (1991-2003) moving toward liquid multipolarity (2004-2013), and towards competitive multipolarity (2014-2024). It is an essentially analytical (not just chronological) framework distinguishing discrete systemic environments that changed the incentives and constraints affecting Turkish Foreign Policy behaviour. Each period is examined through distinct crisis windows (the 1994 Nassia accident, the 2008 Georgia War and the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War), demonstrating how Türkiye used Montreux to control great-power pressures.

The empirical analysis functions through the three principal mechanisms of the "Balancing Autonomy" model, restriction, legitimacy and mediation. Serving as the primary manifest mechanisms, they help turn systemic pressures into actual policy outputs and provide the anchor for systematic comparison over time.

- Restriction: stands for Türkiye's employment of Montreux-based legal and administrative instruments to limit transit (for example so-called in-rule limitation decisions, e.g. based on Art. 19-21; on duration of stay, tonnage or passage).

- Legitimation relates to the legal-rational language used to justify actions (i.e., the degree of referencing Montreux in official statement, and the focus on "law/prudence/status quo" in public discourse).

- Mediation: Parallel diplomatic engagement (that goes with rule-based neutrality - kind of Türkiye's mediation or facilitation moves in the period of crisis as that of Black Sea Grain Initiative¹⁵ and demonstrates regio regime-based differentiation from general alliance, NATO discourse).

These three observations together verify, empirically, the mechanism-output chain of the model. By tracing these mechanisms, the study can assess continuity and change on Türkiye's behaviour.

The research is based on a rich database of primary and secondary sources. Looming largest, the main body is stitched together from archival files at the Republic Archive (BCA), official statements from MOFA, maritime safety regulations, Montreux-related notifications, government policy documents, and extensive newspaper coverage

¹⁵ For more information, see: *United Nations, Black Sea Grain Initiative (Joint Coordination Centre)*, <https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative/background>

from foreign and national outlets. They provide concrete evidence of decision-making, bureaucratic logic and responses to crises. Secondary sources situate the analysis inside scholarship of the Montreux regime, Turkish foreign policy, middle-power theory and realist IR theory. Secondary analyses were checked systematically against all primary references for accuracy and correspondence.

The methodological combination of periodized historical reconstruction, mechanism-based process tracing, and multi-source empirical triangulation to be found below presents a carefully theorized account of the dynamics of Türkiye's Straits policy rather than a mere narrative. This integrated methodological approach demonstrates how systemic environments, domestic filters, and regime-anchored instruments interact to produce the patterned behaviour conceptualized as "Balancing Autonomy".

1991-2003: Prudent Balancing in the Unipolar System

The end of the Cold War not only dismantled the bipolar international system but also necessitated the redefinition of Türkiye's foreign policy orientations. The emergence of US military, economic, and political power as the decisive element of the global system in the early 1990s initiated an exceptional phase in international relations known as unipolarity. As Kenneth N. Waltz emphasized in his realist system theory, the anarchic structure of the international system pushes states to seek balance to ensure their security.¹⁶ However, this post-Cold War structure has been described by some researchers as the hierarchization of the anarchic order.¹⁷ This new order narrowed the manoeuvrability of middle-sized states while also creating new security vacuums. For Türkiye, this process meant, on the one hand, the consolidation of its position in the Western alliance as a NATO member, and on the other hand, facing new regional risks emerging from the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The power vacuum formed in the Black Sea basin elevated Türkiye, via the Straits, back to the position of a strategic centre.¹⁸ The US policy of democratic enlargement, adopted in the early 1990s,¹⁹ assigned Türkiye the role of a model country aligned with the West.²⁰ However, Türkiye did not transform this position into an expansionist desire, instead following a prudent and balancing line. The legal status provided by the Montreux Straits Convention functioned as an instrument of stability for Türkiye during this period; the preservation of the regime served to maintain the delicate balance between national interests and the international order. Indeed, in September 1993, security concerns arising from the political crisis in Russia and the conflicts in Georgia were reflected in the press, emphasizing the necessity for Ankara to pursue diplomacy based on balance and prudence in the Black Sea.²¹ In June 1994, analyses highlighting United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's calls to re-establish the international order on the

¹⁶ Waltz, 1979, p. 117-128.

¹⁷ Layne, 1993, p. 5-10.; Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 360-363.

¹⁸ Özcan, 1998, p. 19.; G. Berber, 2013, p. 345.

¹⁹ Lake, 1993, p. 658-659; Talbott, 1995, p. 47-50.; Brinkley, 1997, p. 111-113.

²⁰ Kut, 1998, p. 51-52.

²¹ *Cumhuriyet*, Sept. 26, 1993, p. 1.

foundation of multilateralism and law, and asserting that Ankara should continue its balancing diplomacy in the Black Sea,²² showed that the prudence-based line Türkiye followed was aligned with global trends.

The policy of Türkiye during the 1990s can be described by a constant search for prudence and equilibrium. Ankara did not try to change the Montreux regime and without any reservations implemented its provisions even when under international pressure.²³ The challenge of the heightened US military presence, post-Gulf War was a difficult one, and yet Ankara has consistently refrained from actions which could jeopardize regional balance in order to avoid damages to its position in the Western alliance. This position was a classic realist demonstration of the constraint on power and the need for prudent politics. At the same time, new littoral states like Ukraine and Georgia sprang up and tanker traffic expanded, creating a diplomatically complicated political scene. This led Türkiye to focus on ramping up security rules while defending the Montreux system. The public and official discourse in August 1993 was about enhancing the environmental security dimension of Montreux with no room to bypass the spirit of the convention.²⁴ This preference for dialogue included further support by the then Russian President Boris Yeltsin's appreciation of Türkiye's balancing role.²⁵ During all this time, Türkiye had no regulation that would disrupt the balance of basic regime; military crossings were kept under meticulous surveillance. This neutrality showed in a way via Türkiye's main intention, defending its sovereign rights and the stability of international order. But in July 1994, Russia delivered a formal note to Türkiye regarding the new Straits Regulations, while Ankara explained that the regulations were not contrary to Montreux but merely an administrative measure regulating maritime traffic safety.²⁶ The legal framework of the Montreux regime continued to be a subject of debate in the late 1990s when a new draft regulation came onto the agenda in August 1997, the Turkish Foreign Ministry announced that Montreux would not be changed, and only its implementation would be updated.²⁷

Although the structural conditions of the system narrowed Türkiye's room for manoeuvre, they did not entirely constrain it. The global hegemonic position of the US directed middle-sized states more towards a strategy of adaptation rather than balancing. Türkiye adapted to this structure by strengthening its role within NATO, giving full support to the alliance's new security strategy at the 1999 Washington Summit. Policies in areas such as energy security and the navigation regime ran parallel to the general orientations of the West. Ankara, while fulfilling its alliance obligations also in counter-terrorism strategies within the NATO framework, established a prudent balance between national interest and international responsibility.²⁸ Nevertheless, Türkiye viewed the Montreux regime as an inviolable element of balance and exhibited cautious resistance

²² *Cumhuriyet*, Jun. 19, 1994, p. 1.

²³ Özersay, 2015a, p. 587.

²⁴ *Milliyet*, Aug. 28, 1993, p. 1.

²⁵ *Milliyet*, Sept. 10, 1993, p. 1.

²⁶ *Cumhuriyet*, Jul. 1, 1994, p. 1.

²⁷ *Cumhuriyet*, Aug. 14, 1997, p. 1.

²⁸ Varinli, 2006, p. 11-15.

against initiatives that would open the Straits' status to debate. Indeed, in February 1994, in the face of increased military activity in the Black Sea, it was emphasized that Türkiye would strictly adhere to the Montreux provisions and would take the necessary steps against possible violations.²⁹ This policy demonstrated that Türkiye developed a rational adaptation to the systemic hierarchy but did not enter complete dependency.

The most concrete area of application for this strategy was energy diplomacy. The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline negotiations, which came onto the agenda starting in February 1993,³⁰ aimed to safeguard the stability of the Montreux regime by targeting a reduction in the heavy tanker traffic in the Straits.³¹ Following the tanker accident in March 1994, the security risk posed by tanker traffic to Istanbul was intensely debated in public opinion, and it was reported that Russia opposed the pipeline projects intended to alleviate pressure on the Straits. Türkiye addressed the environmental security concerns within the legal boundaries of Montreux and sought international support to increase passage safety.³² By February 1995, analyses were being made that the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline would support the stability of the Montreux regime by reducing tanker traffic in the Straits, and that Türkiye was pursuing a balancing strategy in energy diplomacy with this project.³³

During this period, two main views were debated in Türkiye: either to convene a new conference to abolish Montreux or to change its clear provisions, such as Article 2; or to issue a domestic law regulation that was not contrary to Montreux.³⁴ Türkiye, seeing the risks of opening Montreux to debate, preferred the second path and, on July 1, 1994, put into force the "Regulations for Maritime Traffic in the Straits and the Marmara Region".³⁵ Türkiye's enactment of this regulation led to international debates on the grounds of environmental security. The Regulations presented an administrative framework designed to increase the safety of navigation without interfering with the Montreux principle of freedom of passage. This framework included the establishment of Traffic Separation Schemes (TSS) in line with international standards, the requirement for large vessels (150 meters and over) to provide prior notification for passage (Art. 29), and the requirement for ships carrying dangerous cargo to obtain permission from the administration (Art. 30). One of the most debated articles was Article 24, which granted the administration the authority to "temporarily suspend traffic".³⁶ In June 1994, Russia, finding this regulation (especially Art. 24 and 29) contrary to the Montreux Convention, accused Türkiye of upsetting the Black Sea balance. Turkish Foreign Ministry sources,

²⁹ *Cumhuriyet*, Feb. 15, 1994, p. 1.

³⁰ Hale, 2025, p. 246-247.

³¹ *Cumhuriyet*, Feb. 12, 1993, p. 1.

³² *Cumhuriyet*, Mar. 15, 1994, p. 1.; *Cumhuriyet*, Mar. 16, 1994, p. 1.

³³ *Cumhuriyet*, Feb. 1, 1995, p. 1.

³⁴ Özersay, 2015a, p. 587.

³⁵ BCA, 30-18-1-2/762-515-1.; For more information, see: *Ulaştırma ve Altyapı Bakanlığı Denizcilik Genel Müdürlüğü, Türk Boğazları Deniz Trafik Düzeni Yönetmeliği Uygulama Yönergesi*, <https://denizcilik.uab.gov.tr/uploads/pages/yonerge-talimat/tbdtyuy-26-12-2024-all.pdf>

³⁶ Özersay, 2015a, p. 588-589.

however, maintained the balancing diplomacy line by stating, The Regulations are fully compliant with the provisions of Montreux.³⁷ Meanwhile, the public and civil society exhibited a similar sensitivity. In September 1995, it was stated that Ankara opposed the Straits becoming an oil transport route and that the Montreux provisions protected the priority of security and sovereignty. During the same period, the calls from the Marmara and Straits Municipalities Union for the protection of the Montreux regime³⁸ and the maritime protests in the summer of 1998³⁹ brought the environmental risk created by tanker traffic to the centre of the country's agenda. The foreign press also brought similar concerns to international public opinion during this period, emphasizing that the heavy oil transport in the Straits posed a serious environmental threat to Istanbul.⁴⁰

In the mid-1990s, Türkiye's energy diplomacy settled into a strategic framework that supported the Montreux regime. In September 1995, it was reported that the US appreciated Türkiye's sensitivity regarding energy traffic and environmental security in the Straits and supported Ankara's policy of diversifying Montreux-compatible energy corridors.⁴¹ In February 1996, it was conveyed that while Ankara supported the Baku-Supsa pipeline, it had designated the Baku-Ceyhan project, which would reduce traffic in the Straits, as its main goal, and that this strategy aimed to strengthen Montreux's stability.⁴² Türkiye's determination to protect the Montreux regime was affirmed at the highest state level in May 1996, when President Süleyman Demirel drew attention to the environmental risks of oil transport in the Straits and stated that Türkiye would not hesitate to take necessary measures within the Montreux framework.⁴³ Ankara framed the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, in particular, as a core component of its strategy to protect both energy security and the legal balance in the Straits.⁴⁴ Although US support for the Supsa pipeline in July 1996 appeared to weaken the Baku-Ceyhan project, Türkiye insisted on this pipeline, citing the environmental risks in the Straits. Likewise, Ankara evaluated Baku-Ceyhan not only as an energy route but also as a strategic balancing element for the sustainability of the Montreux regime.⁴⁵ In October 1998, this project was presented by Ankara as a strategic solution supported on environmental security grounds and compatible with the balancing logic of the Montreux regime.⁴⁶

In the conditions of the period, Türkiye's domestic political structure was at least as decisive as the system in the shaping of its foreign policy. The fragmented coalition governments of the 1990s, economic crises, and bureaucratic disarray limited Türkiye's foreign policy-making capacity. The 1994 and 2001 economic crises narrowed the state's room for manoeuvre, leading Ankara to show a high level of adaptation to the conditions

³⁷ *Milliyet*, Jun. 28, 1994, p. 1.; *Milliyet*, Jul. 1, 1994, p. 1.; *Milliyet*, Oct. 25, 1994, p. 1.

³⁸ *Cumhuriyet*, Sept. 25, 1995, p. 1.

³⁹ *Milliyet*, Jun. 8, 1998, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Financial Times*, Jun. 15, 1999, p. 44.

⁴¹ *Milliyet*, Sept. 30, 1995, p. 1.

⁴² *Cumhuriyet*, Feb. 9, 1996, p. 1.

⁴³ *Cumhuriyet*, May 10, 1996, p. 1.

⁴⁴ *Cumhuriyet*, Jun. 8, 1996, p. 1.

⁴⁵ *Cumhuriyet*, Jul. 15, 1996, p. 1.

⁴⁶ *Milliyet*, Oct. 12, 1998, p. 1.; *Cumhuriyet*, Oct. 13, 1998, p. 1.

imposed by the system. Turgut Özal's short-lived pursuit of an active foreign policy in 1991 was not long-lasting due to a lack of domestic political support, and after 1993, foreign policy reverted to a line centred on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and mindful of institutional balances. This model, based on bureaucratic rationality, preserved stability in the long run while prioritizing prudence in decisions.

By the late 1990s, international pressure mounted over the Straits Regulations. In November 1997, the US, Russia, and Greece compelled Türkiye to accept certain technical changes during an IMO meeting. Ankara maintained, however, that these regulations would not alter the legal balance of Montreux. The IMO platform became the arena for harsh diplomatic struggles throughout this period. The Russian Federation, arguing that the regulations were contrary to Montreux, requested member states not to respect them, a thesis supported by actors such as Bulgaria and the Oil Companies International Marine Forum (OCIMF). Türkiye, on the other hand, defended the regulations with statistics showing they reduced accident rates and left the meeting, rejecting demands that violated its sovereignty, such as the sending of a mission.⁴⁷ The repeated statements by Turkish Foreign Ministry officials that Ankara will not make concessions on Montreux reflected the balancing diplomacy approach of the period.⁴⁸ Other news in the press that same week showed that the US and some allied countries had brought new proposals to limit Türkiye's inspection powers, but Ankara opposed these initiatives, emphasizing that no concessions would be made on Montreux's sovereignty-based provisions.⁴⁹ The pressure continued in December 1997 with Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's discourse during his Ankara contacts urging cooperation instead of conflict in the Straits⁵⁰ and his formal reiteration of objections to the 1994 regulations.⁵¹ In the same period, demands for administrative management also strengthened in domestic public opinion; in October 1997, the business world's call for "single management is essential" brought traffic and safety concerns to the agenda.⁵² In the face of these pressures, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye at the time, İsmail Cem, declared that Türkiye would strengthen its administrative control instruments while adhering to Montreux.⁵³

As a result of these international pressures and the negotiations conducted on the IMO platform, Türkiye revised the 1994 Regulations and put the "Turkish Straits Maritime Traffic Regulations" into force on November 6, 1998.⁵⁴ These new regulations included concrete steps demonstrating Türkiye's "balancing" aspect, namely its compliance with international law. The most important change was the reversal of the approach in the 1994 Regulations, which had stated that its rules would also apply to warships, a stance contrary to the "principle of warship immunity." The 1998 Regulations

⁴⁷ Özersay, 2015a, p. 590-591.

⁴⁸ *Cumhuriyet*, Nov. 25, 1997, p. 1.

⁴⁹ *Cumhuriyet*, Nov. 27, 1997, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Tunçer, 1998, p. 467.

⁵¹ *Milliyet*, Dec. 15, 1997, p. 1.

⁵² *Milliyet*, Oct. 3, 1997, p. 1.

⁵³ *Milliyet*, Oct 4, 1997, p. 1.

⁵⁴ BCA, 30-18-1-2/955-246-10

(Art. 49) explicitly exempted warships from most of these rules and from penalties (Art. 51).⁵⁵ Similarly, the mandatory pilotage rule for Turkish vessels, which was contrary to Montreux, was abolished; all vessels conducting “non-stopover passage” (whether foreign or Turkish-flagged) were only “strongly advised” to take a pilot.⁵⁶ The most enduring “Balancing Autonomy” move of these legal arrangements, however, was made in the field of terminology. The term “transit passage” used in the 1994 Regulations carried the risk of preparing a legal ground for US and Russian claims to apply the 1982 UNCLOS regime to the Straits. With the intervention of the Council of State, this term was replaced in the 1998 Regulations with the concept of “non-stopover passage”, which is more in line with the spirit of complete *liberté de passage* (freedom of passage) in the original French text of Montreux. This move allowed Türkiye to affirm the *sui generis* status of the Straits through domestic law without being a party to UNCLOS.⁵⁷ While Türkiye demonstrated adaptation to the international system with these legal steps back, it tightened the rules in its area of autonomy, namely, in matters concerning national navigational safety. For example, it was decreed that traffic in the Istanbul Strait (Bosphorus) would be closed in both directions when visibility drops below 0.5 miles, and that the entry of large vessels into the Çanakkale Strait (Dardanelles) would be prohibited if the current speed exceeds 6 miles/hour.

This balance achieved with the 1998 Regulations was reinforced by a decision in favour of Türkiye at the IMO in 1999. With the support of states like the US and the UK, the issue was dropped from the IMO agenda on the condition that Türkiye establish a Vessel Traffic System (VTS) in the Straits. During the same period, the international press also drew attention to Türkiye combining this strategic position with energy diplomacy. In a Financial Times report, US Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson stated that Türkiye was offering tax incentives and security guarantees to international companies to turn Ceyhan into a regional oil terminal, and that Washington supported this initiative on the grounds that it would reduce tanker traffic in the Straits and strengthen regional security.⁵⁸ It was also noted that this support was closely related to the awarding of the 40 million dollar VTS contract to a US company (Lockheed Martin) and the US’s support for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.⁵⁹ Türkiye continued to expand its area of autonomy despite this international support. Indeed, as the emphasis on the risk posed by giant tankers became more frequent in the press in 2001, Strait’s security became a common concern for the public as well as the state.⁶⁰ In line with these concerns, Ankara further tightened the rules with a regulation issued in October 2002. With this new regulation, it was made mandatory for dangerous cargo ships longer than 200 meters to pass during daytime and for such vessels to present their international insurance policies.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Özersay, 2015, p. 598

⁵⁶ BCA, 55-00246-000010.

⁵⁷ Köse, 2022, p. 873-874.

⁵⁸ *Financial Times*, Oct. 30, 1998, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Özersay, 2015b, p. 819.

⁶⁰ *Milliyet*, Jun. 20, 2001, p. 1.

⁶¹ Özersay, 2015b, p. 820.

Türkiye's "Balancing Autonomy" practice in the 1998-2001 period was not limited to this administrative and technical balancing. The stopping of a ship carrying S-300 missile parts in the Canakkale Strait in June 1998 demonstrated that Ankara effectively used its control authority under the Montreux framework in the military field as well.⁶² Another important stress test of this process was the *Varyag* crisis, which occurred between 1998-2001. The passage of this massive platform, sold by Ukraine to China, which was without engine and rudder (and thus undefined in Montreux), was not permitted; it was resisted for a long time on the grounds that it could set a precedent for Russia and other littoral states. However, with diplomatic assurances and the VTS system also set to become operational, passage was permitted in a controlled manner in November 2001 (by completely closing the Strait traffic).⁶³ According to Köse, Türkiye granted the passage permission in exchange for a commitment from China to procure low-altitude missile systems, which its ally the US had refused to provide.⁶⁴ This event demonstrated how Türkiye used its *sui generis* authority in the Straits to leverage a gain by balancing against one ally (the US) with another power (China) in the strategic arena.

The 1991-2003 period was defined by a status quo foreign policy, a clear manifestation of "Balancing Autonomy" under post-Cold War conditions. Türkiye took a balancing, yet careful approach in the face of domestic and international challenges. The model mechanisms operated: the limitation mechanism by formally introducing the 1994 and 1998 Straits Regulations and closely scrutinizing passage of warships to account for new tanker traffic flows and regional security. This was constructed on a legitimacy discourse, which continually placed such measures in the technical, safety and formally legal framework of the Montreux Convention. At the same time, the mediation mechanism required managing rival external powers: Türkiye pursued its energy diplomacy through Baku-Ceyhan while preserving a cardinal NATO role and was reluctant to undertake ventures that might upset Russia. This overall posture arose from the intersection of domestic vulnerability and awareness on foreign affairs, for which Montreux became a vital safety catch. The 1990s thus institutionalized this prudence and continuity, setting the foundation for subsequent phases of Turkish Straits policy.

2004-2013: Active Balancing in the Transition to Multipolarity

Türkiye entered the 2004-2013 period with a concrete gain from the Regulations struggles of the 1990s. Following the diplomatic success achieved at the IMO in 1999, the Turkish Straits Vessel Traffic and Information System (VTS), established with a 40 million dollar investment,⁶⁵ became fully operational at the end of 2003.⁶⁶ Supported by this new internal capacity provided by the VTS, Ankara further tightened the rules with a regulation issued in October 2002, making it mandatory for dangerous cargo ships longer than 200 meters to pass during daytime and for such vessels to present their international

⁶² *Cumhuriyet*, Jun. 16, 1998, p. 1.; *Milliyet*, Jun 16, 1998, p. 1.

⁶³ Köse, 2022, p. 854.

⁶⁴ Köse, 2022, p. 900.

⁶⁵ *Hürriyet*, Sept. 11, 2002, p.2.

⁶⁶ Köse, 2022, p. 884-885.

insurance policies.⁶⁷ This technological and administrative autonomy also formed the foundation of Türkiye's active balancing role in the new era.

This new increase in internal capacity, which Türkiye gained through the regulations struggles and the VTS move, coincided precisely with a period when the international system began witnessing a distinct multipolarity from the mid-2000s onwards. The legitimacy crisis experienced by the US after the 2003 Iraq War, the economic rise of China, and the resurgence of Russia shook the balances of the unipolar order. These trends, which undercut the 1990s era American-centred order, gave middling powers more strategic wiggle room. The European Union's enlargement,⁶⁸ the growing weight of Asia, and new alliance-seeking in the Eurasian landmass, these developments shook up geopolitical balance. This transformation offered the first opportunity to Türkiye since the end of the Cold War, to pursue an active regional diplomacy. During this period, the nature of Türkiye's foreign policy was given a rather more autonomous appearance than the cautious status-quo-ism of former years. New diplomatic rhetoric, formed within the context of the zero problems with neighbours' perspective gave Türkiye a regional mediator-stabiliser soft power identity. But this quest active foreign policy did not imply either that constraints provided by the system had altogether ceased to exist. Although Ankara's room for manoeuvre had expanded, fluctuations in global balances forced Türkiye to simultaneously remain in alignment with the West and to pursue a careful balancing policy with Russia. The Straits policy, as part of this general foreign policy line, was also founded on coordination with the Western alliance and a conflict-free basis with Russia.

As stated at the outset, Türkiye largely maintained the prudence and caution-based diplomatic understanding it had followed in its 2000s foreign policy during this period as well, defining its national interest within rational limits, without turning its desire to increase power into an ostentatious regional hegemony. The most striking and concrete stress test of this understanding occurred during the Russia-Georgia Crisis in August 2008. During the crisis, the US sought to send two hospital ships, the *USS Mercy* and the *USS Comfort*, each around 70,000 tons, through the Straits to deliver humanitarian aid to Georgia. This request clearly violated the maximum limit of 30,000 (or exceptionally 45,000) tons set by Montreux for non-littoral states. Türkiye, taking a firm stance against this request from its ally, the US, cited the Montreux provisions and did not permit the passage of these ships. In the face of this legal resistance, the US changed its strategy and sent the aid via smaller warships (like the 9,000-ton *McFaul*) that fully complied with Montreux's tonnage and duration (21-day limit) rules.⁶⁹ Türkiye's strict implementation of Montreux against its own ally and its preservation of the legal status quo were met with satisfaction even by the Russian General Staff.⁷⁰ In the second phase of the crisis, as US ships showed a tendency to exceed the 21-day stay limit, the restrictive role of Montreux in crisis management was also emphasized in the international press. An analysis

⁶⁷ Özersay, 2015b, p. 819-820.

⁶⁸ Tezcan, 2019, p. 111.

⁶⁹ *Milliyet*, Aug. 21, 2008, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Özersay, 2015b, p. 821-823.

published in The Times stated that while the presence of NATO warships in the Black Sea was deemed threatening by Moscow, these activities were conducted in accordance with the clear provisions of the Montreux Convention, and notably, that NATO's room for manoeuvre was automatically limited by the convention's 21-day duration of stay.⁷¹ In this context, Russia reminded Türkiye of its responsibility to fully implement Montreux and ensure the ships departed the region when their time expired.⁷² Türkiye's strict implementation of Montreux towards both superpowers and its preservation of the legal status quo constituted one of the clearest examples of "Balancing Autonomy." Türkiye, despite being a NATO member, used the Montreux regime as a "legal shield" to maintain balance with Russia, without breaking its alliance with the US. This decision, as a requirement of both law and balance politics, kept the crisis management on a legal footing without taking a step that could disrupt the balance of power.

These years were a phase in which Türkiye brought multilateralism to the forefront in its foreign policy. The 2003 Iraq War's disruption of regional security balances steered Ankara away from unilateral alliance relationships and toward a more balanced foreign policy search. Türkiye undertook the task of ensuring regional security by expanding Operation Black Sea Harmony,⁷³ which it launched in 2004, within the NATO framework as of 2009.⁷⁴ This policy ensured the institutionalization of its balancing actor role under multipolar conditions. During the same period, the start of negotiations with the European Union maintained its belonging to the Western system, while developing relations in the energy field with Russia, such as the Blue Stream Project,⁷⁵ reinforced Türkiye's eastward diplomatic balancing. However, increasing energy dependency complicated the delicate line between Türkiye's balance and autonomy. Indeed, analyses reflected in the press in January 2006 pointed out that the new international competition based on energy supply security was narrowing Türkiye's room for manoeuvre, and Ankara was forced to conduct careful balance diplomacy in the face of these pressures.⁷⁶

During this period, Türkiye successfully used the argument of the tanker danger in the Straits in its energy transport routes diplomacy as well. While the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project was progressing against the threats of the 1990s, this time in 2004, when the danger emerged that Kazakh and Russian oil would increase traffic in the Straits, Türkiye brought the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline project onto the agenda using this new argument. Indeed, in the international press during the same period, it was emphasized that the security pressure in the Straits had become a structural problem. An assessment published in the Financial Times stated that the progressively worsening security problem in the Straits was a situation directly threatening millions of people

⁷¹ *The Times*, Aug. 29, 2008, p. 37.

⁷² Köse, 2022, p. 896.

⁷³ For more information, see: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, "Blackseafor" - For the purpose of enhancing peace and stability in the Black Sea area..., <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/blackseafor.en.mfa>

⁷⁴ Aydın, 2009, p. 271-285.; Triantaphyllou, 2013, p. 58.

⁷⁵ For more information, see: Gazprom, "Blue Stream", <https://www.gazprom.com/projects/blue-stream/>

⁷⁶ *Cumhuriyet*, Jan. 31, 2006, p. 1.

living in Istanbul, that the heavy maritime traffic in the Straits was creating not a temporary but a continuous blockage, and therefore, the maritime traffic could only be managed under an effective regulatory regime.⁷⁷ Another report stated that Türkiye refused to relax safety rules due to its environmental disaster warnings, and this situation deepened the supply crisis for European refineries. Turkish officials expressed that the frequent closures of the Straits due to fog and heavy traffic posed a serious safety problem.⁷⁸ This context gave further impetus to Türkiye's efforts to divert energy transport away from the Straits. This multifaceted energy diplomacy strategy enabled Türkiye to both increase security in the Straits and achieve its goal of turning Ceyhan into an energy terminal. Indeed, with the commissioning of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline in 2005 and the general effect created by these projects, a statistical decrease in the number of vessel passages began after 2007.⁷⁹

On a structural level, this period was a phase in which Türkiye adapted to the compelling dynamics of the multipolar system but did not fully submit to this entire framework. Ankara increased its cooperation with Russia and regional countries to balance the insecurity created by the US's Iraq policy, while also maintaining its NATO obligations. Its position as a transit country for energy corridors provided Türkiye with a new strategic depth. The policies implemented revealed a profile of Türkiye that protected its interests and operated within the system's framework, rather than directly competing with great powers. The great power rivalry in the Black Sea brought the balancing function of the Montreux regime to the forefront again in the mid-2000s. In March 2006, reports in the press brought up claims that US plans to maintain a permanent force in the Black Sea would challenge the Montreux regime, and that Türkiye would strictly adhere to Montreux for the sake of regional stability against these initiatives.⁸⁰ This stance by Türkiye was also met with appreciation by Russia. Indeed, Russian Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov appreciated Türkiye's adherence to the Montreux provisions and stated that the Convention was the fundamental document for preserving peace in the Black Sea.⁸¹

Viewed from a neoclassical perspective, the increase in internal capacity and political stability became decisive in Türkiye's foreign policymaking during this period. Post-2004 economic growth, a strong executive structure, and bureaucratic centralization created a more self-confident line in foreign policy. The economic institutions reshaped after the 2001 crisis and the increased foreign trade capacity also strengthened the material foundations of foreign policy. Especially in the post-2009 period, the intellectual framework shaped by public diplomacy and the use of soft power moved Türkiye's historical heritage to the centre of the era's diplomacy. Geographical location, historical ties, and cultural spheres of influence were reinterpreted as legitimate foundations for

⁷⁷ *Financial Times*, Jan. 14, 2004, p. 18.

⁷⁸ *Financial Times*, Jan. 14, 2004, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Özersay, 2015b, p. 820.

⁸⁰ *Cumhuriyet*, Mar. 5, 2006, p. 1.

⁸¹ *Cumhuriyet*, Nov. 21, 2008, p. 1.

foreign policy.⁸² This approach put the neoclassical realist emphasis on the internal filter into practice; although the systemic pressures remained the same, Türkiye's response to them changed.

The 2004-13 period was, in general, a phase of prudent balance one that is a clearer manifestation of the "Balancing Autonomy". Türkiye's foreign policy increasingly had the ability to act autonomously, apart from being in line with the system. This capability was activated in debates about the Black Sea presence of NATO when Ankara's insistence on Montreux rules application is demoted from a refusal to deploy the model's great-power balancing capacity, as opposed to an anti-Western position. The restriction mechanism had been presented most openly in the Georgian War 2008. Through the rigour of Türkiye's application against U.S. hospital ships of Montreux's tonnage and duration constraints, rule-based neutrality was thus achieved, thereby avoiding an alliance tear. The full operationalization of the VTS system, which reformed the Straits traffic regime, created a truly important institutional reinforcement to this model's legitimacy discourse. At the same time, Türkiye's mediation mechanism manifested in a cautious diplomatic engagement with both Washington and Moscow. This active yet conflict-averse approach towards security and energy transit in the Black Sea revealed the principled as well as pragmatic nature of Türkiye's balancing which effectively employed the Montreux regime to manage the transition to multipolarity.

2014-2024: Strategic Balancing in the Era of Crises

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea was a pronounced geopolitical rupture in the post-Cold War order. This had dramatically changed the security architecture of the Black Sea and with it, the balance of power internationally. Western sanctions, NATO's military reinforcement of its eastern flank and Russian militarization of the Black Sea combined to generate a fresh tension that harked back to the classic bipolar climate. For Türkiye, the emerging landscape raised the value of Montreux as a strategic asset. With the increase in military movement in the Black Sea also imposed a direct political meaning on every passage through the Straits. Montreux implementation became, in this critical stage, Türkiye's premier tool to support the stability of the region.

Structurally, annexing Crimea shifted the Black Sea military balance of power in Russia's favor. This development NATO was also forced to step up its military footprint and rethink its security priorities in that region. Türkiye did not respond by tilting in the opposite pole and it carried out its balancing role. It agreed with NATO's European security decisions but prudently refused to take a stance that would result in direct confrontation with Russia. This was realist regional balancing à la John Mearsheimer.⁸³ Ankara's strict adherence to the status-quo provisions imposed by Montreux aimed at avoiding militarization of the Black Sea and protecting its own territory from this hostility.

Türkiye thus charted its way between pressures that were heavy, coming from both sides. It had to satisfy its Western alliance obligations as a NATO member but also played

⁸² Aldırmaz, 2019, p. 36-37.

⁸³ Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 138-139.

out a profound mutual dependence with Russia in terms of economy, energy and tourism. This twofold balance required a permanent adjustment between the expectations of systemic expectations on the one hand, and national economic interests on the other. Ankara took after the West's legal stance it does not recognize the annexation of Crimea but refrained from joining a sanctions camp, to maintain its relations with Russia. This quest for balance reflected the age-old realist maxims of prudence and caution. The primary spanner complicating this balance was Russia's extraordinary increase in its military traffic through the Straits, notably following Crimea annexation in 2014 and entry into Syria in 2015. The number of Russian warship passages, which was around 160 in 2013, broke a record by exceeding 270 in 2015 and 2016.⁸⁴ Escalatory actions, such as a soldier on a Russian warship posing with a missile on his shoulder during passage through the Strait in December 2015, demonstrated the delicate ground on which Türkiye had to execute its "Balancing Autonomy" model.⁸⁵ Another factor necessitating this balance policy was Türkiye's loneliness within the alliance. In fact, in the crisis that erupted with the downing of a Russian jet on November 24, 2015,⁸⁶ NATO refrained from giving concrete military support to its ally Türkiye, contenting itself with merely confirming the border violation and calling on the parties for moderation.⁸⁷ This situation once again showed that Türkiye could not fully rely on NATO in times of crisis and that it had to depend on its own regime-based instrument, Montreux.

From the beginning of this period, the transformation in the domestic political structure also became an element affecting the direction of foreign policy. The centralization of executive power accelerated decision-making processes while making the leadership factor more visible. The development of national production capacity in the defence industry, diversification in energy policies, and institutional coordination enabled Türkiye to act more independently in the face of systemic pressures. The most concrete indicator of this internal capacity increase was experienced in the Turkish Naval Forces. National construction programs, such as the MILGEM⁸⁸ (National Ship) project triggered by the 1996 Kardak Crisis, increased the capacity of the Turkish navy. This capacity increase transformed into a new geopolitical doctrine, conceptualized in 2006 by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz as "Mavi Vatan".⁸⁹ This doctrine formed the fundamental internal capacity foundation behind the "Balancing Autonomy" policy that Türkiye exhibited in the Straits, the Black Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean in the post-2014 period. However, at this point, partial economic dependence on Russia, especially in the energy field, made Türkiye's balance policy more complex. Russia's share in natural gas supply and tourism revenues did not make a full rupture in foreign policy possible. Despite this, Türkiye transformed this dependency into an area of strategic flexibility; it pursued a

⁸⁴ Köse, 2022, p. 901.

⁸⁵ Köse, 2022, p. 898.

⁸⁶ For more information, see: *Anadolu Ajansı*, "6 Soruda Rus uçağının düşürülmesi", Nov. 25, 2015, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/pg/foto-galeri/6-soruda-rus-ucagin-dusurulmesi-/4/176863>

⁸⁷ Köse, 2022, p. 898.

⁸⁸ For more information, see: *Türkiye Yüzyılı Proje*, "MILGEM Projesi", <https://turkiyeyuzyili.com/proje-milgem-projesi>

⁸⁹ Köse, 2022, p. 903-905.; For more information, see: *MaviVatan.net*, <https://mavivatan.net/>

policy aligned with the West, yet protecting its own interest priorities. This behaviour also aligns with Stephen M. Walt's balance of threat approach.⁹⁰ Türkiye took positions according to the direction and intensity of the perceived threat, turning to cooperation when the threat perception decreased and to limitation when it rose. Thus, Ankara succeeded in creating a "Balancing Autonomy" area between both the West and the East.

After 2014, it was observed that the prudence and caution-based diplomacy understanding in Türkiye's foreign policy stance became even more pronounced in the face of increasing systemic pressures. Ankara prioritized diplomacy, refraining from the use of power, and defined its national interest with a long-term rationality. Its immediate implementation of the Montreux Convention's provisions regulating the passage of warships upon the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022 is a continuation of the crisis management instrument reflexes⁹¹ it had exhibited in previous historical stress tests, such as the 1945-46 Soviet notes crisis, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, or the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation. This decision, anchored in international law, simultaneously insulated Türkiye from becoming a direct party to the war and upheld the military balance in the Black Sea. This stance, a concrete reflection of classical realist thought which argues that the balance between power and prudence can be established through diplomacy, made the Montreux regime the fundamental strategic foundation Türkiye resorted to in its crisis management during this period. Indeed, this decision was shaped within the intense discursive pressure environment created by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's digital securitization strategy⁹² in the communication dimension of the war.

In 2021, during the period of escalating Russia-Ukraine tension, the Montreux regime once again sat at the centre of Türkiye's foreign policy balance. Indeed, in April 2021, upon the announcement that US warships would pass into the Black Sea, Russian President Vladimir Putin requested Türkiye to implement Montreux with sensitivity. Immediately after this request, the US announced that it had abandoned sending the warships.⁹³ This incident confirmed the emphasis from Turkish Foreign Ministry sources that Montreux is the guarantor of regional peace. Assessments made during that period characterized Montreux as a historical balance mechanism that protects the Black Sea from being a hot line of global competition precisely in such times of tension.⁹⁴ Türkiye's role within the framework of the "Balancing Autonomy" model was not limited to such regime-based restrictions but also manifested itself in the form of active mediation. The Grain Corridor Agreement,⁹⁵ signed on July 22, 2022, through Türkiye's mediation, became one of the symbolic examples of this new era. Türkiye, by taking diplomatic initiative in the harsh competitive environment among great powers, contributed to

⁹⁰ Walt, 1987, p. 21-22.

⁹¹ Aldırmaz, 2025, p. 239-341.

⁹² S. Eryiğit et al., 2025, p. 2.

⁹³ Köse, 2022, p. 910.

⁹⁴ *Cumhuriyet*, Apr. 10, 2021, p. 1.

⁹⁵ For more information, see: *Millî İstihbarat Teşkilâtı (MİT), Karadeniz Tahıl Koridoru Girişimi (Black Sea Grain Initiative), "Tahıl Koridoru Yeni Düzenleme", <https://www.mit.gov.tr/uploads/v/NOB68TCevxoL.pdf>*

regional peace and, at the same time, de facto reinforced the importance of the Montreux regime.

As mentioned above, Türkiye's immediate implementation of the Montreux provisions upon Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 constituted the most recent example of the "Balancing Autonomy" approach in crisis management. Indeed, analyses conducted after this move emphasized that Montreux provided Türkiye the opportunity to manage the crisis in the Black Sea without becoming a direct party, and that the convention stood out as the most powerful balancing mechanism in Türkiye's hands.⁹⁶ The policy style pursued during this period represented the original foreign policy line termed "Balancing Autonomy" in this study. Türkiye, without adopting a fully resistive stance against the system's pressures, created an independent room for manoeuvre by using its internal capacity. Adherence to the Montreux provisions was the fundamental foundation of this autonomy. The implementation of the Convention's Article 19 during wartime is a continuation of the crisis management instrument reflexes exhibited in previous historical stress tests and offered Türkiye the possibility of both remaining within international law and maintaining neutrality in crisis management. In the same period, Ankara's maintenance of economic relations with Russia, fulfilment of its NATO obligations, and undertaking of mediation initiatives constituted a mature example of multi-layered balance politics.

The 2014-2024 period, as a phase in Türkiye's foreign policy where the three approaches of realism operated simultaneously, has been the period where the approach conceptualized as "Balancing Autonomy" in this study was most concretely observed. This contemporary form of Türkiye's balance tradition, maintained since Lausanne, combined the prudence of classical realism, the consciousness of necessity of structural realism, and the autonomy-seeking of neoclassical realism based on internal capacity and leadership factors. In this era of high systemic tension, the model's mechanisms reached their most pronounced form. The restriction mechanism was demonstrated in the timely and accurate application of Articles 19-21 of the Montreux Convention during the Russia-Ukraine War. This policy was supported by a strong discourse of legitimacy that framed Türkiye's choices in legal-rational terms, crucially decoupling the policy from bloc alignment narratives. At the same time, Türkiye's reputation as a practitioner of rules underpinned its role as an active mediator on diplomatic channels such as in the Black Sea Grain Initiative. This synthesis of actions, which combined the careful implementation of Article 19 during the crisis crunch with the simultaneous execution of mediation, constituted a concrete expression of "Balancing Autonomy". Türkiye thus deployed the Montreux regime as a sophisticated legal and strategic protection mechanism that secured its non-belligerence and preserved its quality as an independent centre of gravity in the international system.

However, this very reliance on the Montreux regime as the model's core instrument was simultaneously challenged by a domestic political debate that constituted a unique stress test. The Kanal Istanbul debate serves as the most recent stress test demonstrating the model's limitations and functioning. This project constitutes a

⁹⁶ *Cumhuriyet*, Mar. 3, 2022, p. 1.

resilience test for “Balancing Autonomy”. When systemic tension rises, the political cost of alternative waterway projects increases; this situation leads to the strengthening of the preference for balancing based on the Montreux regime. Even if internal capacity and leadership centralization are high, the balance of international legitimacy and the strategic risk-gain calculus deter Türkiye from deviating from Montreux’s status quo provisions. This systemic pressure, unlike in the 1990s, now also comes from the Russian Federation, which views Montreux as a shield limiting NATO’s presence in the Black Sea.⁹⁷ Indeed, Russian Ambassador Aleksey Yerhov explicitly stated in 2021 that the Kanal Istanbul project will not and cannot change Montreux’s status, as Montreux is vital for Russian security.⁹⁸ Thus, rather than functioning as a concrete policy trajectory, Canal Istanbul operates as a strategic stress test that exposes the structural limits of “Balancing Autonomy” and illustrates how regime-anchored flexibility narrows under conditions of heightened systemic tension.

Conclusion

The Straits question has been one of the area’s most clearly demonstrating historical continuity in Turkish foreign policy, and the principles of prudence, balance, and autonomy institutionalized by the 1936 Montreux Straits Convention have formed the foundation of this continuity. This study has examined the continuity and transformation of Türkiye’s Straits policy in the period from the end of the Cold War to 2024, through the three fundamental approaches of realism (classical, structural, and neoclassical). Based on this analysis, an original conceptual framework called the “Balancing Autonomy” model has been developed. The main thesis of the article is that Türkiye’s stance on protecting the Montreux regime is not merely a legal or technical preference but is based on a multi-layered rationality operating on the three levels of realism.

The findings have shown that the classical, structural, and neoclassical forms of realism offer a complementary framework for explaining state behaviour. Türkiye’s stance during crisis moments (e.g., 2008 and 2022) was explained by the “prudence” principle of classical realism; its response to systemic changes (from unipolarity to multipolarity) by the “balance” seeking of structural realism; and the timing and intensity of these responses (weak capacity in the 1990s versus increased capacity post-2000s) by the “internal filter” thesis of neoclassical realism. The 2014-2024 period where increasing systemic pressures and rising internal capacity intersected, has been the phase where the “Balancing Autonomy” model was most clearly observed. The comparative analysis of these three periods has revealed that, despite periodical flexibilities, the principle of rational continuity is dominant in Turkish foreign policy.

The findings of this study have offered significant contributions both to Türkiye’s future Straits policy and to the historiography of the Republic of Türkiye and international relations theory. On the policy level, it has been confirmed that the Montreux Convention is not only a historical status but also the guarantor of Türkiye’s room for manoeuvre in

⁹⁷ Sanders, 2016, p. 80-81.

⁹⁸ Köse, 2022, p. 910.

the multipolar system. On the historiographical level, this study has examined the post-Cold War period based on primary sources and empirically demonstrated the principle of rational continuity in Turkish foreign policy. On the theoretical level, this article proposes “Balancing Autonomy” as a multilayered sub-model of neoclassical realism specifically designed to explain the behaviour of middle powers. The model’s operative mechanisms (restriction, legitimacy, and mediation) are rooted in domestic filters that transform systemic pressures into concrete policy outputs. The model itself is firmly situated within the neoclassical realist tradition, though it integrates the other two layers in distinct roles: Classical realism provides the prudential logic anchoring Türkiye’s long-standing commitment to Montreux, while structural realism clarifies the external conditions that activate these mechanisms. This integrated, regime-anchored framework thus constitutes a mechanism-based explanation for middle-power behaviour in legally structured and geopolitically contested settings. The study’s historical-comparative method demonstrates the empirical utility of applying such multi-level theoretical syntheses.

The “Balancing Autonomy” model’s explanatory reach extends beyond the Straits question, applying to Türkiye’s foreign policy behaviours in general. Beyond the Turkish case, the model functions as a generalizable framework for understanding how middle powers employ regime-anchored instruments in other contested settings. Such dynamics are apparent in the North Sea, where legal and environmental regulations structure regional bargaining; in the South China Sea, where smaller states deploy UNCLOS provisions against great-power rivalry; and within the European Union’s normative regimes, where rule-based instruments define the strategic flexibility of member and non-member states. These parallels confirm that “Balancing Autonomy” constitutes a robust comparative mechanism for analysing how states transform legal-institutional anchors into strategic autonomy under systemic pressure.

The “Balancing Autonomy” framework’s explanatory power can be tested and expanded through future research. Its generalizability demands comparative applications examining other middle powers and alternative regime settings. The post-2022 transformation of Black Sea security architecture, along with the economic dimensions of energy geopolitics, provides an acute empirical domain for testing this regime-anchored balancing under systemic contestation. Furthermore, the model’s domestic filters and the role of advanced diplomatic early warning capabilities must be explored by integrating decision-making analysis with the dynamics of digital information environments, particularly during fast-moving crises. Pursuing this research agenda will confirm that the “Balancing Autonomy” model is both a theoretical and a practical foreign policy analysis tool.

By formulating “Balancing Autonomy,” this study departs from one-dimensional interpretations of realism. The model provides an explanatory theoretical framework for the survival strategies of middle powers in the multipolar world; the case of Türkiye constitutes its most mature form. Ultimately, the model represents the contemporary manifestation of the historical balance politics shaped in the Turkish Straits regime, a continuity extending from Küçük Kaynarca to Lausanne and Montreux.

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