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TARIK BASBUGOGLU AND
UMUT KORKUT, GLASGOW
CALEDONIAN UNIVERSITY



Twists and Turns: The Pragmatism Behind *Turkey's Foreign-Policy* Pivots

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Executive Summary

Despite the apparent shift in Turkey's foreign policy towards a more ideological stance under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the country's geopolitics remain inherently pragmatic. It is true the Turkish government's close relationship with Russia has undermined its partnership with NATO countries while its obstruction of Sweden's and, until recently, Finland's accession to the alliance has raised further questions over security and unity. However, these positions should not be considered a permanent turn away from the West.

Over the past ten years, Turkey's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war and Syrian conflicts has proven that its geopolitical importance cannot be underestimated. Ahead of the country's 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections in May, Western policymakers have an opportunity to reset their approach. With a view to incentivising Turkish realignment, regardless of which political party wins, Western leaders should consider a new platform for engagement – underpinned by strong institutional mechanisms – which acknowledges the country's strategic position in the world.

Prior to 2022, Erdogan's Turkey had been seen to be distancing itself from Western partners, a policy symbolised by its purchase of Russia's S-400 missile system and its subsequent exclusion from Western defence projects, most notably the F-35 fighter-aircraft programme. While these events undoubtedly pushed the country out of step with Western interests, they should be understood in the context of Turkey's decades-old pursuit of autonomy.

Indeed, dramatic developments in 2022 were indicative of a different repositioning. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine last February, Turkey has attempted to juggle its deep economic and security ties with Russia and its NATO membership. A dramatic reopening of diplomatic relations with Israel and the Gulf states followed in the summer, adding to speculation that Turkey was pursuing a new foreign policy in the Middle East and beyond. Most recently, the Turkish government's praise of Saudi Arabia for being

one of the first to send humanitarian aid in response to the devastating earthquakes of February 2023 is further evidence of its desire to encourage this rapprochement.

While inconstant, Turkey's pragmatic foreign-policy and context-dependent alignment with the West has continued under Erdogan. Although the president has shrewdly used the country's Islamic heritage as a tool for leverage when Turkey has found itself in conflict with the West and allied Gulf nations, its approach has remained deeply opportunistic, at times strategic and, above all, pragmatic.

So, are we seeing the emergence of a Turkey gradually pivoting back to a "bridge" role between the East and West? And, if so, what opportunities does this present to Western partners seeking to stabilise their relationship with the country and draw it back into their orbit?

Through the long arc of Turkish geopolitics, this report analyses foreign-policy doctrines such as "strategic autonomy" and "zero problems with the neighbours", which have underpinned periods of both close Western cooperation (the 1990s) and strengthening ties with Russia (the 2010s). While Turkey should still be generally considered a member of the Western alliance, it has at times drawn on its relationship with Russia to advance its autonomy.

Across the Middle East and beyond, Turkey's roles – from backing the Government of National Accord during the Libyan civil war to supporting Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well as its deep security interests in Iraq and Syria – are considered through the prism of Western and Russian interests – and the foreign-policy doctrine of autonomy. These positions highlight how its approach to geopolitics has been shaped by pragmatism rather than by dogmatic ideology – whether Islamism or a quest to replicate the might of the Ottoman Empire – or even steadfast loyalty to either East or West.

Against this backdrop, Western policymakers have an opportunity to take proactive steps to develop a more durable relationship with Turkey rather than reacting with reflexive hostility when the country's positioning comes

into conflict with or varies from their own. Russia's faltering war in Ukraine cannot be solely relied upon to guarantee that Turkey will transition away from the Russian sphere of influence. Potential routes to cultivating this relationship are institutional mechanisms, economic policy and investment.

New Platform for Engagement

In the absence of any likelihood that Turkey will join the European Union in the immediate future, an alternative institutional arrangement could be based on enhanced investment and trade developed on the back of the existing customs union between Turkey and the European Union. This arrangement could be extended to involve the United States and the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is well placed to serve in a mediating role between Turkey and the United States to pave the way for such stronger investment and trade ties.

A potential model for such an approach is the recently created Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. Led by the United States and launched in 2022, the 14-member framework focuses on enhanced trade, supply-chain resilience, infrastructure and clean energy as well as anti-corruption. While this framework does not explicitly mention China, the platform is undoubtedly underpinned by the US desire to better compete with Chinese influence in that region.

Similarly, a new framework with Turkey in partnership with the European Union and the United Kingdom could serve to reduce Turkey's economic reliance on Russia and build a durable alliance that transcends ad-hoc geopolitical interests.

Foreign-Policy Insights Ahead of the 2023 Elections

There also needs to be a better understanding of the challenges facing the country's foreign-policymakers, whichever direction Turkey takes during the elections. The following insights are crucial to this understanding:

- Turkey's close relations with Russia will continue regardless of the election results. However, if the opposition alliance wins the elections, Western policymakers can expect Turkey to become a more reliable NATO member and ally.¹ The leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kilicdaroglu, promises to implement democratic reforms to establish closer links with the European Union if he comes to power² while Meral Aksener, head of the Good (IYI) Party, has described a future partnership with the European Union as "strategic".³ This does not mean that EU membership is a pressing priority for either the European Union or Turkey, however. In fact, neither believes there is a real possibility of Turkey joining the bloc in the immediate future, with issues such as migration, populism in Europe and authoritarianism in Turkey all stumbling blocks. This is why opposition leaders are not campaigning on this issue. And while the opposition has adopted more of a pro-Ukrainian stance on the Russia-Ukraine war, it is still unlikely to be outwardly hostile to Russia. This is because Turkey is dependent on Russian tourism, energy and trade. If the existing government – run by the eight-party Cumhur Alliance of which the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is the biggest – wins again, Turkish pragmatism and foreign-policy opportunism will continue. In this scenario, the AKP will retain close ties to Russia unless Turkey is able to secure major concessions from the West, especially support for its faltering economy.
- Turkey will continue playing an active role in the Russia-Ukraine war. As one of the few nations that can still talk to leaders in both Ukraine and Russia, its position here should not be undermined or underestimated. As the war in Ukraine escalates, Western policymakers should look for ways to leverage this Turkish role, specifically its ability to speak to both parties.
- Opposition leaders, namely the CHP, will continue improving Turkey's relationships with neighbours in the Middle East. Deputy Chairperson Unal Cevikoz has presented the party's Middle East Peace and Cooperation Organisation plan according to which it will aim to increase dialogue with Iran, Syria and Iraq.⁴ This initiative could attract support from the European Union, which needs to stem refugee arrivals caused

by instability in the Middle East. However, a possible rapprochement between Turkey and Iran could anger the Republicans in the United States as well as Israel and the Gulf nations.

- Turkey is likely to continue stalling Sweden's membership of NATO in the short term while it seeks additional concessions and because this position shores up support for the AKP among nationalist and anti-West Turkish voters at home. Ankara wants Sweden to declare certain Kurdish groups terrorists and extradite people belonging to the Gulen movement, which is outlawed in Turkey. While Sweden has agreed to withdraw an arms embargo it imposed on Turkey in 2019, it has proved more reluctant on the Kurdish and Gulenist questions. The Turkish government also aims to secure concessions from the United States, ranging from approval for a Turkish military operation against the Syrian Kurds to approval of a proposed billion-dollar modernisation to its F-16 fleet. While the United States had been reluctant to move on these points, instead offering security partnerships to both Sweden and Finland, and therefore weakening Turkey's negotiating position, new developments as of April 2023 indicate a shift. In return for Turkey's approval of Finland's NATO membership, which it had also been stalling, the US State Department has accelerated its approval of sales of selected kits needed to modernise Turkey's F-16 fleet. Further movements on the issue of Sweden's accession ratification is also expected soon after the Turkish elections, notwithstanding the results.
- Turkey's main concern in Syria has shifted from regime change to the neutralisation of the Syrian Kurds. Western policymakers should assuage Turkish concerns on security. Otherwise, recent Turkish military operations in Syria could intensify, endangering advances that had been made against the Islamic State (ISIS). A land operation against the Syrian Kurds remains a major risk factor.

02

Introduction

Significant domestic and foreign-policy challenges face the Turkish government heading into the May 2023 elections. Turkey and its neighbour Syria are grappling with the aftermath of catastrophic earthquakes, which have tragically killed more than 50,000 people. These events are exacerbating already dire macroeconomic conditions characterised by the depreciation of the Turkish lira and hyperinflation, which are combining with uncertainty on the country's borders, with some neighbours having little control over their territories, others embroiled in civil and interstate wars. These conditions are compounding the unpredictability that already characterises the political environment in the country.

Geopolitically, while both Western and Turkish commentators have depicted Turkey as an anti-West and regional Islamist power, the government's tendency towards foreign-policy pragmatism should not be discounted. In the absence of political and public accountability at home, the Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led Cumhur Alliance has shown it can shift Turkey's position swiftly and unexpectedly, without facing domestic consequences.

Amid such domestic and geopolitical unpredictability, Turkey has been attempting to reconceptualise its position within the Western alliance. While the country leans on its historical membership in the alliance to exert its influence as a regional power – including beyond its immediate geography – it is equally likely to adopt an independent stance by turning to Russia when its interests come into conflict with or are different from those of the United States. Broadly speaking, Turkey is attempting to tread a fine line by not outrightly antagonising the United States when it does cooperate with Russia.

There is a real threat posed by Russia, which can hurt Turkey economically (especially its energy and tourism sectors) and geopolitically (by supporting the Syrian Kurds and preventing Turkish military operations in Syria). Ultimately, being part of the Western alliance still defines Turkey's defence and foreign policy. This means there are questions about how Turkey balances these two camps and its own independent interests.

Turkey's Current Spheres of Influence and Involvement

Leveraging Russia to counter Kurdish interests in Syria: The civil war in Syria has remained the biggest challenge for Turkish foreign policy over the past decade. Although the government initially sided with the United States to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime, it has failed to secure US support for its Syrian policy after 2015. The United States chose to support the Syrian Kurds to contain the Islamic State (ISIS) threat, becoming more unresponsive to Turkish demands on this issue. As a consequence, the Turkish government has turned to Russia to provide a counterweight to the US-Kurdish partnership. However, a conflicting consideration is the migration of refugees to Turkey caused by Russia's military offensives in Idlib, with waves likely to have included jihadist factions. This oscillation between the United States and Russia is examined below in the context of these shifting interests in Syria since 2011.

Diverging from the West on Iraq: Relations between Turkey and Iraq should be studied in the context of the Kurdish issue, of which there are two parts. The first is the autonomous Kurdish region that borders the Turkey-Iraq border. The second is the presence of a Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) military camp in Iraq's Qandil mountains. There have been repeated Turkish military incursions into northern Iraq since the 1990s to target this camp – a practice that has caused alarm among Turkey's Western allies.

From an ally of Qatar to warming ties with Gulf nations: Since the 2010s, Turkey has repeatedly sided with Qatar against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. For instance, Turkey's AKP openly supported Qatar when the Saudis led a five-country trade blockade against it in 2017, including by sending Turkish troops to the country. This support intensified the geopolitical competition between Turkey and its Gulf rivals, provoking Saudi Arabia to support Turkey's rivals in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, in summer 2022, both Saudi-Turkey and United Arab Emirates-Turkey relations started to normalise, a move most likely motivated by the AKP government's deepening economic woes.

Taking sides in Libya: Tensions between France and Turkey have been caused by the latter's active presence in Libya and the Mediterranean in general. Since 2014, Turkey has partnered with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) against Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army. In contrast, France's support of Haftar's troops has been motivated by access to natural resources and the desire for a secular government in Tripoli. Despite President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ardent support for the GNA, he has retreated on his rhetoric when faced with the possibility of Western-led economic sanctions.

A cautious hand in Nagorno-Karabakh: Turkey has adopted a cautious stance in its support of Azerbaijan against Armenia during the conflict between the two over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. To avoid triggering opposition from Putin, it tested Russian missile systems and provided logistical support to the Azerbaijani forces. Russia heavily influenced the extent of Turkey's involvement, encouraging the government to offer mediation during the conflict.

The Eastern Mediterranean issue: The European Union and Turkey have been in opposite camps when it comes to issues affecting the Eastern Mediterranean. The Turkish government has pursued an aggressive policy to exploit natural-gas resources in the maritime zones over which it has disputes with Greece. Meanwhile, France has thrown its weight behind Greece and Cyprus while the European Union as a whole has threatened Turkey with economic sanctions to deter it from unilateral action in the Eastern Mediterranean. More recently, however, there are signs of greater cooperation between the two on this matter.

Walking a fine line during the Russia-Ukraine war: While the Turkish government has sided with Ukraine, insisting on its territorial integrity and condemning the Russian invasion in public, the country has not participated in economic sanctions against Russia. Islamists and nationalists within Turkey's governing alliance have limited the extent of the country's response, as have considerations such as finances and energy dependence on Russia. This approach is likely to have created more leverage for the Turkish government in its dealings with US President Joe Biden's administration on this matter.

Turning to China in Asia: The Turkish government has sought partnership with China when its relations with the West have been in crisis, even though they don't share similar geopolitical interests. Turkey turns to China as a military and economic partner to strengthen its position when it differs with the West over regional and global issues. There has also been a tendency for Erdogan's government to use Islam as a tool to advance its relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan. In this context, the AKP's officials have constructed a narrative around "brotherhood" to expand Turkey's geopolitical interests in Central Asia.

A growing footprint in Africa: Turkey has become an influential power in sub-Saharan Africa. The country uses its humanitarian and religious institutions, including the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency as well as the Directorate of Religious Affairs, to deliver aid and finance the construction of mosques and infrastructure in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Somalia. Furthermore, the government has exploited its newly gained expertise in drone technology, using this area of diplomacy to bolster the tenets of its foreign policy. Military exports to sub-Saharan Africa have increased; for example, Turkey sold Bayraktar TB2 armed drones to Ethiopia, which it has used against rebels in Tigray. With its growing military presence designed to offset the influence of France, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the region, Turkey's manoeuvres have also served to expand the rivalry between Turkey and France, extending it from the Mediterranean to sub-Saharan Africa.

The most significant geopolitical relationship remains the bilateral one between Turkey and the United States. By revisiting the historical partnership between the two, this report highlights Turkey's oscillation on foreign-policy decisions in the context of this relationship. Over the past two decades, its "zero problems with the neighbours" policy that was in play between 2003 and 2011 resulted in the country containing its regional advance to cultural and economic influence. However, since the end of this period, the AKP has adopted a more aggressive foreign-policy approach based on a type of contemporary neo-Ottomanism, which has seen it sponsor the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in Egypt, Syria and Tunisia in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings. These changing policies have resulted in swings towards and away from the United States, a pattern that is characteristic of Turkey's foreign policy over the long term.

03

Twists and Turns: Turkey's Relationship With the West

In the wake of the second world war, the Turkish government adopted a pro-Western position in response to Soviet aggression, which had included Joseph Stalin's demands for military bases in the Bosphorus as well as the return of the eastern provinces of Kars and Ardahan, formerly under Russian control. This rapprochement with the West characterised Turkish foreign policy in the post-war years and still defines its most institutionalised relationship to this day. For example, in the 1950s, Turkey sent military troops to Korea to support the United States, became a NATO member and then opened the Incirlik Air Base (1955) to serve the interests of the Western alliance.

From Autonomy to Partnership

While Turkey's relationship with the United States has been at the centre of its pro-Western stance, political crises such as the Johnson letter,⁵ the opium crisis⁶ and the Cyprus issue⁷ created challenges between the two during this period. In 1974, as a result of Turkey's invasion of Cyprus and its opium policies at home, the US Congress imposed a military embargo as well as economic sanctions on the country. This prompted the Turkish government under Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit to pursue closer military relations with the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1970s in line with the policy of "strategic autonomy", which aimed to demonstrate Turkey's independence from the Western alliance. Under this first geopolitical doctrine pursued by Turkey after the second world war, weapons were purchased from the Soviet Union and commercial ties enhanced between the two to diversify trade.

The Turkish government also adopted a pro-Arab stance during the Arab-Israeli conflicts of the period, refusing to grant the United States permission to use its air base to support Israel against Egypt and Syria.⁸ To garner political support for its territorial dispute in Cyprus, Turkey sought to enlist leaders in the Arab world by drawing parallels with the Palestinian

issue. The government also considered the Middle East a lucrative market for exports. During this phase of strategic autonomy, Turkey built relationships with non-Western countries with a view to reducing its economic and security dependence on the Western alliance.

During the administration of US President Jimmy Carter, the United States attempted to repair its ties with the Turkish government on the basis of the country's geopolitical significance. Since Turkey was considered a critical ally of NATO in its defence of the Mediterranean, the US Congress lifted its arms embargo in 1978 so that Turkish military bases could be employed to contain the rising Soviet threat in the region. Turkey went on to become a critical geopolitical actor once more after returning to a pro-West and pro-NATO position in response to the events of 1979 – the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran – and a military coup at home a year later, after which the government needed to contain leftist movements and groups domestically.

A decade on, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was another crucial moment in the strengthening of Turkish-West relations. Turkey's government under President Turgut Ozal withdrew its cooperation with Iraq on both energy and commercial affairs while making Turkish military bases available for the use of US-led coalition strikes against Iraq. In return for its support on Iraq, US President George H.W. Bush's administration promised to deliver military and economic support to Turkey. This pro-NATO position continued during the Yugoslav wars, with Turkey supporting expansion of the alliance into Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Later, the Turkish government showed solidarity with the United States by sending military forces to Afghanistan soon after the 9/11 attacks, with the beneficial relationship strengthening until the first AKP government came to power in 2002.

During this period, Turkey also made a move to integrate itself more fully into Europe. Having signed a customs union with the European Union in 1995, Turkey agreed to implement the bloc's accession criteria to support its bid for EU membership. Other members, most notably Germany and France, were not in favour and stalled major progress on this front.

Zero Problems With the Neighbours

A new Middle East crisis was emerging just as the AKP under the leadership of Erdogan came to power in November 2002. Determined to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the United States needed access to Turkish territory to move troops and resources. US and Turkish government officials engaged in intense bargaining, considering what the nature of compensation should be in return for Turkey's participation in the Iraq war as a member of the coalition of the willing.⁹ The US administration promised to extend economic aid to Turkey¹⁰ while voting against a decision to recognise the Armenian genocide in the House of Representatives to satisfy the Turkish government.¹¹

Despite Erdogan's support for the US plans, politicians from the AKP remained hesitant on the eve of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Although Erdogan guaranteed he could pass a bill through the Turkish Parliament granting the United States use of military bases, it was rejected. The majority of AKP's members of parliament hailed from Turkey's Islamist movement and refused to be seen as collaborators in the destruction of Iraq by a Christian power. The aftermath of the vote triggered intra-party tensions, with Ahmet Davutoglu, who would go on to become prime minister, stating that support for the US invasion would compromise Turkey's image among Arab and other Muslim countries.

Although the Turkish public was content with the decision not to take sides, the implication for its foreign policy was increasing mutual distrust between Turkey and the United States. This is likely a major factor behind the US administration's lack of focus on the issue of the Kurds – and their calls for independence – in northern Iraq.¹² Since the overthrow of Saddam's regime, the United States has allied with the Kurds in their aim to create a democratic, pluralistic and decentralised Iraqi government.¹³ Relations between the two countries became strained even further after 11 members of the Turkish Armed Forces were arrested by American troops in July 2003, with the United States alleging they were planning to assassinate the Kurdish governor in the Iraqi city of Kirkuk.¹⁴ This event increased anti-US sentiment in Turkey among politicians and the public.

One reason why the majority of AKP's members of parliament avoided supporting the US-led coalition was their misguided belief that Turkey could be a successor of sorts to the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and Balkans. This proved a major shift in the government's foreign-policy outlook. The AKP set about trying to secure or advance cultural, historical, political and economic ties with its neighbours especially in the Middle East, a form of integration articulated by Davutoglu's "zero problems" policy.

By seeking rapprochement with Iran and Iraq as well as seeking reconciliation with the Assad regime as it exerted its influence over Syria, the AKP was initiating a major foreign-policy twist in the region. Erdogan named Assad his "brother" and even organised family vacations between their two families.¹⁵ The AKP government signed visa-free agreements with the Assad regime in 2009¹⁶ and worked beyond Syrian borders to establish a common visa policy with Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, akin to European Schengen.¹⁷

During the same period, closer relations with Arab and Muslim countries coincided with a cooling-off period in formerly positive relations between Turkey and Israel. The Turkish government became more vocal about the Palestinian issue, causing Israel to become more cautious in its dealings with the country. And while its warming relationship with Iran was not welcomed by the United States, President Barack Obama's administration chose to cooperate with Turkey, defining it as a "strategic partner" – a situation that eventually changed after the Arab Spring in 2011.

04

The Arab Spring, Neo-Ottomanism and the Kurdish Question

Turkey abandoned its “zero-problems policy” as the Arab Spring uprisings spread. People who had been ruled by dictators for decades rebelled against authoritarian regimes, their anger fuelled by high unemployment, escalating food prices, corruption and nepotism. The Tunisian regime fell first followed by Egypt, Yemen and Libya. The Turkish government spied an opportunity. Characterised by several factors, including support for the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and North Africa and greater regional assertiveness in advancing its own economic and political interests, its policy reflected a type of neo-Ottomanism – the pursuit of a stronger presence in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire.

Although the AKP government tried to assume a “big brother” role to Assad in Syria, the sectarianism pursued by his regime caused complications between the two. As protests in Syria evolved into a bloody civil war, Turkey’s foreign policy came under strain, eventually causing it to shift regularly between Western and Russian camps.

Syrian Involvement

The Syrian people’s Arab Spring started in March 2011. To silence them, the Assad regime relied heavily on repressive tactics. While the Turkish government attempted to play the role of mediator, sending Foreign Minister Davutoglu to Damascus to convince the regime to implement some liberalising reforms, it was firmly rebuked by Assad for intervening in Syria’s domestic affairs.¹⁸ After this attempt at reconciliation failed, Turkey allied with the Syrian opposition, opening its territory to the resistance.¹⁹ From the outset, the US-led Western coalition endorsed Turkey’s efforts to support the opposition as they attempted to bring the Assad regime to an end.²⁰

After the official outbreak of war in Syria, the Turkish government pursued pro-democratic and humanitarian narratives to counter the Assad regime's activities. It increased its political support to the Syrian National Council, which at the time represented the opposition, and implemented an "open-door" policy to Syrian refugees in spring 2011. However, this period also involved the emergence of tensions between Turkey and the United States. Turkish support for Syria's Muslim Brotherhood and other jihadi-extremist factions within the opposition became a thorny issue in the bilateral relations between the two. Increasingly bogged down in its full-scale engagement in the Syrian war, Turkey turned to its Western allies to improve its standing among and efforts in favour of the Syrian opposition. However, Western criticism about the level of Turkish intervention began to isolate the country from its traditional allies and this sense of betrayal deepened further as the United States increased its support to the Syrian Kurds to counter the escalating threat from ISIS in 2014. Ultimately, the issue of the Syrian Kurds has evolved into the biggest bone of contention between Turkey and its most important ally.

The Kurdish Question

The origins of the Kurdish question are rooted in the history of the Turkish republic. As President Kemal Atatürk and his politicians defined a new notion of citizenship, based on an inclusive contract of political citizenship but excluding a definition of Muslims according to individual ethnic groups, the space for a Kurdish identity disappeared. Ethnically different but sharing the same religion as the majority of the population, Turkish Kurds were the subject of assimilation policies.

While there were successive Kurdish revolts against the Turkish state between 1925 and 1938, a more tranquil era resumed after the brutal suppression of the Dersim rebellion towards the end of this period. This lasted until the early 1980s when a bloody military coup occurred in Turkey, during which proponents of the Kurdish movement and thousands of ordinary citizens were systematically tortured, beaten and sentenced to death. The military regime banned use of the Kurdish language in public.

In the wake of this repression, the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) started guerrilla warfare against the Turkish state, taking on the highly repressive security environment.

The PKK's ability to mobilise a significant part of the Kurdish population in the early 1990s was met with further suppression by the Turkish state. More activists, politicians, ordinary citizens and militias were killed. The military used counterinsurgency methods to "dismantle" the alleged links between rural populations and the PKK by forcing rural Kurds to become "village guards" or move away from what it referred to as "war zones" – their homes. Approximately 2 million Kurds were internally displaced as a result. To limit advocacy of Kurdish rights, the Turkish state outlawed Kurdish political parties throughout the 1990s. Although Prime Ministers Ozal and later Suleyman Demirel promised to resolve the Kurdish question, no amount of political pressure on the Turkish Armed Forces proved sufficient to end the repressive tactics and resolve the conflict.

Syrian President Hafez al-Assad's support for the PKK became a major factor complicating Turkish-Syrian relations in the 1980s to 1990s. Syria's military intelligence Mukhabarat used the PKK as a tool to destabilise Turkey, with the Assad regime permitting PKK training and education camps to exist in Syria.²¹ After securing NATO support, Turkey threatened Syria with military action in 1998 unless it changed the extent of its support for the PKK.²² Although the Syrian regime conceded and Turkey went on to capture Abdullah Ocalan – the militant leader of the PKK – in 1999, the Kurdish question has continued to be an important factor shaping the Turkey-Syria relationship. Equally, factions affiliated with the PKK have remained the most influential Kurdish actors in Syria.

The Threat Posed by Syrian Kurds to Regional Hegemony

During the Syrian civil war, the Syrian regime once more used the "Kurdish card" to undermine the Turkish government's aspirations for regional hegemony and its public support for the opposition. The Assad regime allowed Salih Muslim, the co-chair of the Democratic Union Party and later

the leader of the Syrian Kurds, to return to Syrian territory. It also withdrew its forces from Kurdish-dominated cities in 2012 so that the pro-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) could establish their own military authority in northern Syria – just across the border from Turkey. This situation alarmed the Turkish authorities, which were threatened by a de-facto autonomous Kurdish region being established on the country's border. To trump this particular card, the Turkish government entered a peace process of sorts with the PKK in 2013. As part of this effort, it tried to convince Syrian Kurds to join the ranks of the Free Syrian Army, which was trained and supported by Turkey, rather than following their own independent agenda.

Causing further alarm to the AKP was the decision by the United States to increase its support for the Syrian Kurds, since they were perceived to be the only reliable ground force to defeat ISIS. Further consolidation of Kurdish authority along its borders became a major threat to Turkey's sovereignty as the civil war progressed.

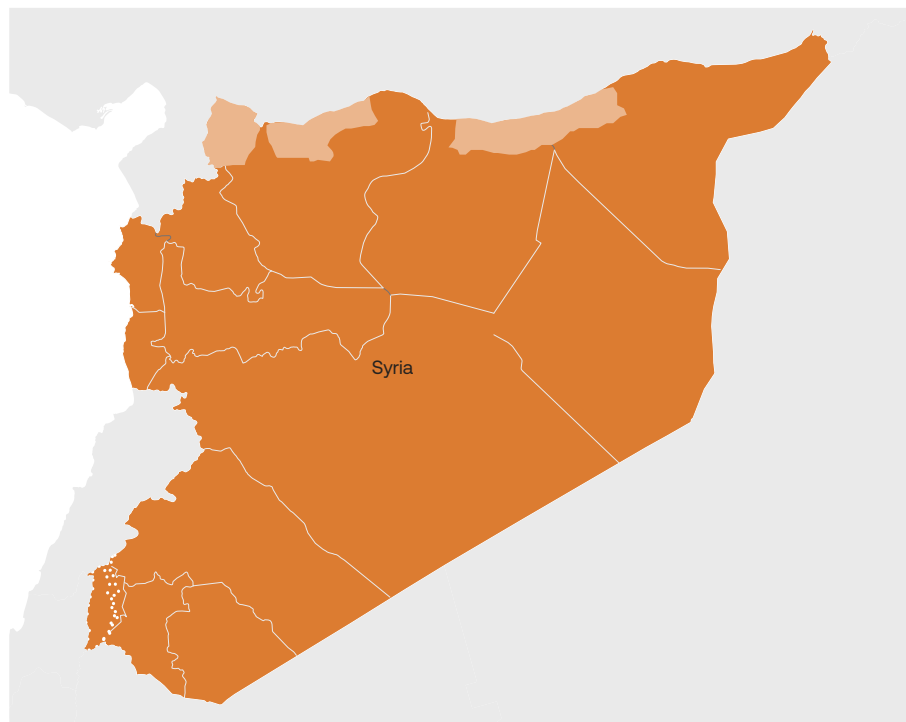
Tensions between Turkey and the United States reached their height in 2014 when the latter's support for Kurdish forces became clear as ISIS attacked Kobane – a Kurdish-majority town in Syria. Although Kobane did not have much strategic importance, it was the last stronghold against the jihadist militancy in northern Syria. At the time, the Obama administration took the radical decision to support the Syrian Kurds with airstrikes, weapons and ammunition, at the same time calling on Turkey to throw its weight behind the policy. Since the AKP still prioritised the fall of the Assad regime over tackling Islamic radicalism, it proved reluctant to join the US-led, anti-ISIS coalition. Indeed, at the beginning of the battle for Kobane, the AKP government chose instead to use the event as leverage to convince the United States to strike once again at the Assad regime. Turkey's efforts on this proved futile.

This had far-reaching consequences for the AKP. The main part of the Syrian Kurds' military relied on the leftist YPG, considered a sister organisation of the PKK by Turkey. In its view, the YPG was a security threat rather than a reliable ally against ISIS. These concerns fed into Turkey's changing priorities in Syria, including its anti-Assad policy, as countering

increasing Kurdish power becoming the priority instead. After losing its parliamentary majority at home in June 2015, Turkey's AKP declared war on the Syrian Kurds.

FIGURE 1

The Turkish presence on the ground in Syria



■ Areas under Turkish control

- There have been at least five military operations since 2015 including Shah Euphrates (2015), Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018), Peace Spring (2019) and Claw-Sword (2022-ongoing)
- Turkey has committed between 4,000 and 5,000 of its own soldiers and funds towards the Syrian opposition, which has more than 50,000 fighters in its rank
- In areas it controls, Turkey provides education and health services, the Turkish lira is in circulation and the Turkish postal service is operational

Source: Financial Times, UN, Clingendael Institute

Supporting the Syrian Opposition

The Turkish government had two motives for its support of the Sunni-dominated Syrian opposition after the outbreak of the civil war. First, it aimed to use the armed opposition to contain the Syrian Kurds. Second, it saw the Sunni-Arab fighters as a regional proxy and counterbalance to Iranian influence over Damascus. Accordingly, the AKP adopted a sectarian narrative, depicting Turkey as the leader of the Sunni world, with the natural extension of this taking the form of support for armed Sunni-Arab groups, in particular the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

The FSA does not possess a strong central military command, instead comprising factions funded by different countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Unsurprisingly, they have typically pursued the agendas of their funders instead of presenting a common front against the Syrian regime. Nevertheless, the FSA captured several cities including Aleppo, although they failed to overthrow the Syrian regime, which had the backing of Russia and Iran. As the FSA lost ground, militant-jihadist groups such as the al-Nusra Front and ISIS stepped in. While the Turkish government did not establish any alliance with ISIS, it did turn a blind eye to the activities of al-Nusra, frustrating the US administration, which identified the front as a Syrian offshoot of al-Qaeda.

After the AKP lost its majority at home in 2015, the Turkish government adopted more aggressive policies towards jihadist groups in Syria mostly in an attempt to improve relations with the US administration. The government allowed US forces to use Incirlik Air Base to strike ISIS facilities in July 2015, which prompted ISIS cells to order suicide attacks inside Turkey. These terror attacks compelled Turkey to send its army into Syria to fight against ISIS in August 2016, with the FSA also being renamed the Syrian National Army (SNA) as Turkey tried to introduce more hierarchy to the opposition forces.²³ Over the next two years, Turkey deployed the SNA to conduct military offensives against the Syrian Kurds.

As the war in Syria progressed and Russian support prevented the Assad regime's fall, Turkey came to an agreement with Russia to withdraw the opposition presence in Aleppo and push all remaining opposition factions

into Idlib. But this move aggravated the jihadist problem in Idlib, which shares a border with Turkey. The presence of forces belonging to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an al-Qaeda offshoot, in Idlib has become a major headache for the Turkish government. Despite this, Turkey has built a tacit agreement with HTS to sustain order and stability in the region. On the one hand, the AKP has supported opposition units such as the National Front for Liberation (NFL) to weaken HTS's grasp over Idlib. On the other, it has provided logistical support to HTS to deter Russia and the Syrian regime from attacking Idlib. A possible military operation in Idlib could produce a massive refugee flow to Turkey.

Most recently, the Turkish government has upped its attempts to normalise relations with the Assad regime, for several reasons. First, a possible agreement with the regime, including on the return of millions of Syrians, could alleviate the political and economic burden on the government before the upcoming elections. Second, Putin has been increasing pressure on the AKP to re-establish ties with the Syrian regime, potentially in return for economic support. Setting back progress has been Assad's refusal to normalise relations until the Turkish military leaves Syria. In the meantime, the Turkish government continues to support both the HTS and NFL to deter a possible offensive in Idlib.

Military Operations Remain on the Table

One of the AKP's motivations for increasing its aggression towards the Syrian Kurds has been to appeal to nationalist and conservative voters at home. After losing its parliamentary majority in 2015, the Turkish government ended reconciliation efforts with the Kurdish movement at home and conducted several military campaigns against the Syrian Kurds. It has already claimed that further military operations are likely to take place in this critical election year. However, both Russia and Iran have expressed doubts about Turkey's incursions into Kurdish-dominated Tel Rifaat in Syria²⁴ while Russia and the Assad regime have provided logistical support to the Syrian Kurds to deter Turkey.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has repeatedly warned that destroying the authority of the Kurds in Syria could pave the way for an ISIS comeback. This collective resistance has delayed such a Turkish operation to date, but it remains on the table. The AKP has also attempted to open dialogue with the Assad regime to contain the increasing Kurdish influence along its borders, with the Turkish government determined to prevent the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria.

The Extension of the Kurdish Question Into Iraq

The Kurdish question has also shaped Turkey's relationship with Iraq since the first Gulf war. It is pertinent to both the autonomous Kurdish region bordering the Turkey-Iraq border and the presence of a major PKK military camp located in Iraq's Qandil mountains. The latter has meant the Turkish military crossing the border repeatedly to conduct operations there.

Having moved to Iraq and Syria after 1980, the PKK's leadership cooperated closely with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Iranian regime to counter Turkish influence in northern Iraq. Turkey meanwhile worked to expand its trade and energy relations with the Iraqi regime to contain the PKK, the Kurdish presence equally unwelcome to the Iraqi government of the time.

After Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and the resulting US-led military operation that weakened the Iraqi government's sovereignty and control over Kurdish regions, the PKK was able to increase its presence significantly in the 1990s. The Qandil mountains have since become a PKK stronghold, from where the group stages operations against targets in Turkey.

Friction Between Turkey and the United States Over Northern Iraq

Turkish-US cooperation in opposition to Saddam's regime lasted until the US-led invasion of 2003. Although the George W. Bush administration requested access to Turkish military bases to send US troops into Iraq, the Turkish parliament turned this down, causing friction between the two

NATO allies. This is one of the reasons that Iraqi Kurds have become a major ally of the United States in post-Saddam Iraq.²⁵ Turkey has remained anxious about this cooperation, fearing US support for an autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq could have an impact on the nationalist aspirations of its Kurdish population at home.

Relations between Turkey and the United States became particularly strained after 11 members of the Turkish Armed Forces, located at the country's military headquarters in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, were arrested by US soldiers in July 2003. The United States claimed the troops were planning to assassinate the Kurdish governor in Kirkuk.²⁶ The treatment of these soldiers infuriated not only Turkish politicians but also the Turkish public: the crisis became a major turning point for nationalist voters as they questioned the alliance with the United States. Furthermore, it increased calls from nationalist parts of society for Turkey to become more active in northern Iraq, where an autonomous Kurdish region had been formed and the PKK is still very active.

FIGURE 2

Turkey's military footprint in Iraq



Source: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Fikra Forum

Turkey's Forays Into Iraq

As an extension of its “zero problems with the neighbours” policy, Turkey attempted to change the nature of its relationship with the Iraqi Kurds after 2008, increasing trade, energy and cultural cooperation with them. Following the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, another shift occurred in the region, increasing the competition between Turkey and Iran. The AKP government wanted to contain Iranian influence along its border with Iraq by supporting the Iraqi Kurds. But this strained its relationship with Baghdad's pro-Iranian central government.

Since then and despite its best efforts, the AKP government has failed to secure support from the US and the Iraqi Kurds in its competition with Iran over Iraq. In fact, its energy ties with the Iraqi Kurds irked the US administration of the time, which was critical of Turkey's decision to bypass the central government in Baghdad and purchase oil directly from the autonomous Kurdistan region. In March 2023, Turkey promised it would respect an International Chamber of Commerce arbitration ruling that ordered it to stop this practice.

After 2015, once its own domestic efforts to complete a peace process with the Kurds had failed, Turkey adopted a more aggressive position to contain the PKK influence in Iraq. For example, the AKP government declared the leftist Sinjar Resistance Units – an armed force formed with PKK support to counter ISIS – a terrorist organisation so that it could prevent the PKK's growing influence over Iraq's Yazidi population. Since 2019, Turkey has conducted three major military operations against PKK camps in northern Iraq. Despite the protests of Baghdad, it has maintained a permanent military presence in northern Iraq sustained by a large chain of military bases and forward-operation sites along the Iraqi-Turkish border.²⁷ Although Baghdad and Tehran have criticised Turkey's military presence in Iraq, the US has been generally reserved on this issue. This is likely because the Donald Trump and then the Biden administrations have regarded Turkey as a counterweight to Iranian influence over Iraq.

05

Qatar as the Cornerstone of Gulf Policy

The Turkish government did not have significant diplomatic ties with Qatar during the Cold War years. Indeed, relations were limited until Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa came to power in Qatar in 1995 and then the AKP in Turkey in 2002. For many years, Qatar had been stuck between the two regional powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran. So, when the AKP government saw an opportunity to increase its influence in the energy-rich Gulf by cooperating with Qatar, the latter recognised it could contain Saudi and Iranian dominance by reciprocating this Turkish interest. While Turkey and Qatar further developed their economic, cultural and political partnership in the 2000s, it turned strategic after the Arab Spring in 2011.

Alliance With Qatar

Qatar became a major partner of the AKP government in its efforts to support Muslim Brotherhood-led movements in Egypt, Syria and Tunisia. Both countries delivered political and material support to Mohamed Morsi's government in Egypt, which was affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, and they backed the Sunni-led Syrian National Council against the Assad regime. This Qatari-Turkish alliance not only alarmed the Iranian-led Shia axis of resistance, but also irked Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates who, in response, supported the anti-Morsi coalition in Egypt, financing the 2013 coup d'état against him. The two countries took additional steps against Turkey's increasing influence in the Gulf region by banning Turkish soap operas and exports. Later, in 2020, the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar bin Mohammed Gargash accused Turkey of creating "chaos" in the Arab world and of "neo-Ottoman expansionism".²⁸

Indeed, a series of crises during the 2010s saw Turkey side with Qatar against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Turkish government supported Qatar when the Saudis led a financial and trade embargo against it in the summer of 2017, even sending Turkish troops to defend Qatar against a possible invasion. This further exacerbated political competition

between Turkey and the two Gulf Cooperation Council countries, leading them to support Turkey's rivals, namely Egypt, Greece and Israel, during the Eastern Mediterranean crisis. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates subsequently signed defence and economic agreements with Greece to contain Turkey's ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Pivot Towards the US-Led Regional Alliance

Although President Trump's administration was hesitant to intervene in the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar in 2017, the United States did side with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to contain Iran. It also supported economic and military alliances between anti-Turkish countries such as Greece, Cyprus and the United Arab Emirates, partly to protect the gas-exploration rights of US companies in the Eastern Mediterranean. This further increased Turkey's regional isolation as it wrestled with the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic crisis at home.

For much of the 2010s, the AKP pursued a one-sided strategy in positioning Qatar as the cornerstone of its Gulf policy. Since then, however, it has pulled back from this approach with a view to improving cooperation with its regional rivals. Today, in shifting more towards the US-led alliance in the region, which includes Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in opposition to Iran, Turkey is pursuing a more balanced line despite continuing to work with Qatar to maintain dialogue with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. To offset its isolation, Turkey has attempted to increase its economic, political and military ties with Qatar's rivals, namely Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, while simultaneously trying to fix its image as a troubled partner of the Biden administration. Finally, the spring 2023 agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to resume diplomatic relations and engagement on divisive security issues in the Middle East has been met with warm praise from Erdogan, with the deal opening up the possibilities of closer Saudi-Turkey ties in the near future.

FIGURE 3

Turkey's trade, diplomatic and military engagement in the Middle East since 2019



- Turkey and the United Arab Emirates sign a trade agreement in 2023
- Summer 2022 sees a rapprochement between Turkey and Saudi Arabia
- 2022 is also the year in which Turkey and Israel normalise relations
- Construction on a Turkish military base in Qatar is completed in 2019

Source: Reuters

06

Taking Sides in Libya's Civil War

As Libya was one of the few countries to support Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974, Turkey maintained warm relations with Muammar Gaddafi's regime during the Cold War despite the imposition of Western sanctions on Libya. In the 1980s and 1990s, Gaddafi welcomed Turkish construction companies into Libya. However, ties between the two did not develop significantly until the AKP came to power.

Intervention in Libya

In the 2000s, the AKP government viewed engagement with Libya as a way to increase Turkey's economic and political influence in North Africa. It wanted to exploit Libya's agricultural and energy sectors, in addition to its construction industry. However, bilateral ties were disrupted by the 2011 uprising in Libya. While Turkey did not initially endorse Western-led military operations against Gaddafi's regime, it changed its stance in response to US pressure and subsequently supported NATO operations by giving the Western allies access to Izmir Air Base.

When Libya's civil war began in 2014, the Turkish government chose to support the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) in its battle against Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). The AKP considered the GNA an ally because of its Islamist orientation. Turkey partnered with other regional actors, such as Italy and Qatar, to provide political support to the GNA; it also sent foreign mercenaries and drone technology for use against LNA forces. It pursued trade and energy ties too; in 2019, it signed an agreement with Libya to maximise Turkey's maritime boundaries to exploit gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

However, Turkey's stance in Libya irritated a range of international actors that did not favour the GNA. Since the series of domestic terror attacks it experienced in 2015, France had perceived Islamism as a real security threat. It also regarded Haftar's LNA as a better partner on the issue of securing access to energy resources in Libya. In the meantime, since the United Arab Emirates and recently installed Egyptian government considered Muslim

Brotherhood-led movements as threats to their power, they also chose to support the LNA by providing air and logistical support to the army's forces as it tried to capture Tripoli. Russia, which viewed Libya as a country of strategic importance both geographically and for its energy resources, supplied the LNA with military equipment too and sent Russian mercenaries to protect Haftar. For Russia, the Libyan civil war became a way for it to expand its geopolitical influence, as it moved to rebuff the United States and NATO in the region.

Turkish efforts to contain the LNA increased in December 2019 amid an offensive against the Tripoli-based government. Turkish drones struck Russian mercenaries and LNA forces while targeting Haftar's Chinese-made drones. Turkish-backed Syrian fighters were also deployed. This Turkish support helped the GNA retake most of western Libya as the LNA, backed by Egypt, France, Russia and the United Arab Emirates, retreated.²⁹

Although Turkey's interventions in Libya helped bring France, Russia and the United Arab Emirates to the negotiating table, it created problems for the country among the Western alliance. France has accused Turkey of supporting Islamist militias to destabilise Libya while both the United States and Germany have attempted to prevent further Turkish intervention. The Biden administration called on Turkey to pull its mercenaries out of Libya and, in November 2020, a German naval mission intercepted a Turkish ship it maintained was illegally transporting arms and ammunition to GNA fighters.³⁰ Turkish authorities did not allow the ship to be searched.

07

Proceeding With Caution in Nagorno-Karabakh

After the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, conflict erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). Azerbaijan views this region as its territory although most residents are Armenian.

Traditionally, Turkey has backed Azerbaijan's claims, but Russian influence in both countries has limited its actions. For example, Turkey did not provide military assistance to Azerbaijan between 1988 and 1994, when conflict caused thousands of its citizens to flee the region. After Armenia's victory in May 1994, Turkey closed its borders with Armenia, inflicting serious economic damage on the latter.

Military Support for Azerbaijan

In the late 2000s, the Turkish government increased efforts to normalise relations with Armenia, mainly because of its “zero problems with the neighbours” policy, but also due to the Obama administration's electoral promise to recognise the Armenian genocide of 1915 (which took place during the break-up of the Ottoman Empire). Turkey wanted to rebrand itself as a regional power that had strong relationships with its immediate neighbours. However, these efforts foundered as Armenia and Azerbaijan failed to reach a lasting peace agreement. As a result, Turkish-Armenian ties remained strained until the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

In this conflict, Turkey supported Azerbaijan by sending Bayraktar TB2 drones. The AKP believed that providing military equipment to help Azerbaijan win would bolster its own domestic support at home by appealing to nationalist voters. The government also wanted access to Azerbaijan's natural-gas resources, as depreciation of the Turkish lira had led to soaring energy costs. Azerbaijan agreed to supply more gas to Turkey, also giving Turkish companies the rights to reconstruction work in Shusha, a city it took from Armenian forces.

Azerbaijan went on to defeat Armenia in October 2020, with Turkish drones playing a significant role. While the outcome expanded Turkey's influence in the Caucasus, it served to benefit Russia equally, with the conflict highlighting its position of regional leadership. Russia had showed Armenia that without Russian protection, its sovereignty was at risk, thereby weakening Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's pro-West rhetoric. Both Turkey and Azerbaijan also understood that any Armenian-linked political gains they made were contingent on Russian consent.

Turkey now seems to be shifting its stance towards Armenia, for several reasons. First, the Biden administration is more open than previous US governments to Armenian concerns, forcing Turkey to adapt. This was evidenced by Turkey's muted reaction when Biden became the first US president to use the term "genocide" to define the events of 1915. By adopting a softer stance on this issue, Turkey may be hoping to appease the United States and prevent further US action in favour of Armenia. Second, the government understands that Russia will not tolerate further Turkish advances in the Caucasus. Third, Turkey has sought closer ties with Pashinyan's administration since 2021 to offset its isolation in the Mediterranean and Middle East. All of this is allowing Turkey to move from a security-oriented, militarist stance to a role as mediator between Azerbaijan and Armenia, a shift that could be significant as it redefines its relations with the United States and Russia on this issue.

FIGURE 4

Moving into Russia's backyard in the Caucasus



■ Turkish military involvement

- Turkey trains officers in Azerbaijan's armed forces
- Turkey is Azerbaijan's third-largest supplier of weapons
- Bayraktar TB2 armed drones have been at the heart of Turkish military support to Azerbaijan

Source: Al Jazeera

08

The European Union and the Eastern Mediterranean Issue

Turkey has sought EU membership both during and since the Cold War. It signed an association agreement in 1963 and a customs union in 1995 but was excluded from the expansion of the European Union, incorporating Eastern European nations, in the 2000s. When the Turkish government began accession negotiations in 2005, EU officials were ambivalent on full Turkish membership. Both France and Germany viewed Turkey as a cultural “other” in terms of EU identity.³¹ The European Union’s admission of the Republic of Cyprus as a member in 2004 also increased mutual distrust between the bloc and Turkey.

As a coup attempt unfolded in Turkey in July 2016, an additional wedge was driven between the two parties. Turkey declared a state of emergency to facilitate a crackdown on Gulenist factions and institutions. The EU parliament saw this as an authoritarian view and voted to suspend membership negotiations. The issue of refugees also caused friction:³² Turkey’s demand for more financial aid to stop the flow of refugees into the European Union frustrated many European nations. Furthermore, the two sides found themselves in opposite camps during the Eastern Mediterranean crisis of 2020, when Turkey pursued an aggressive gas-exploration policy in waters disputed with Greece. Both Greece and Cyprus, backed by France, condemned the move, while the European Union threatened Turkey with economic sanctions.

Today, there remains little chance of Turkey joining the bloc in the near future.

09

Relations With Russia and the War in Ukraine

As noted, the primary reason Turkey aligned itself with the West and NATO during the post-second world war era was Soviet aggression. Stalin's territorial claims forced Turkey to seek military and financial aid from the West as a deterrent. However, Turkey simultaneously regarded the Soviet Union as a balancing geopolitical factor, even a partner, when its relations with the United States were deteriorating.

In the 1990s, Turkey saw the fall of the Soviet Union as a chance to extend its influence over Central Asian Turkic nations such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The United States also suggested Turkey should serve as a capitalist and democratic model for these nations. This alarmed Russia, however, which opposed Turkish attempts to grow its influence in its backyard. Moscow was also frustrated by Turkish support for Chechen rebels seeking independence from Russia. It responded by playing the "Kurdish card", granting political asylum to Ocalan when he was expelled from Syria in 1998.

Lukewarm bilateral ties did not change significantly in the 1990s and 2000s. In the 2010s, however, they shifted radically, first for the worse, then for the better.

Turkey, Russia and the West in the Shadow of Syrian Conflict

When civil war broke out in Syria, Turkey and the United States worked together to overthrow the Assad regime. Russia, however, saw the fall of Assad – who was losing the war against Turkish-backed Syrian rebels – as a threat to its Middle East interests and provided diplomatic, logistical and financial support to the Assad regime. Assad's subsequent advances against the rebels and the rise of ISIS prompted the United States to shift its focus from regime change to the fight against the militant Islamist group. The Turkish government became frustrated by what it perceived as the

failure of the United States to prioritise its targets in Syria. For instance, the United States declined to hit regime targets after Assad used chemical weapons against civilians in August 2013, despite Turkish appeals. The government also felt threatened when the United States withdrew Patriot missile batteries from Turkey in October 2015.

Russian military planes subsequently violated Turkey's airspace while hitting rebel positions near the Turkish border. Turkey repeatedly warned Russia about these violations and adopted a warn-and-shoot-down approach. In November 2015, the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian SU-24 fighter jet after it allegedly violated Turkish airspace. This marked the lowest point in bilateral relations since the Cold War. Russia imposed economic sanctions (including restrictions on Turkish agricultural goods and travel by Turkish citizens) and threatened severe action if Turkish troops assisted Syrian rebels.

Although the Obama administration supported Turkey diplomatically, it did not intervene because it needed Russian cooperation in the fight against ISIS. To demonstrate its neutrality, the United States withdrew its F-15 fighter jets from Turkey – a move that caused the Turkish government to lose confidence in its US partner.

Turkish-US relations continued to deteriorate after the attempted coup against the Turkish state in 2016. Turkey condemned Washington's failure to extradite Fethullah Gulen, the US-based religious-sect leader it accused of masterminding the attempt. Russia, however, was quick to voice solidarity with Turkey. This, plus Russia's unconditional support for the AKP government, signalled a warming of ties, just months after the major crisis that had brought these two countries to the brink of war.

Turkey's Purchase of S-400 Missiles

Shifts in Turkey's relations with Russia have almost always been linked to fluctuations in its ties with the West and the United States in particular. After its failure to secure US support for its goals in Syria, Turkey steadily built relations with Russia; its purchase in 2017 of S-400 missiles constituted a major turning point.

There were four major drivers for the purchase. First, successive US governments had refused to sell Patriot missile-defence systems to Turkey. Second, Turkey wanted to build ties with Russia to counteract the US-Kurdish partnership emerging in response to the ISIS threat. Third, Turkey wanted to leverage closer ties with Russia when the United States blocked Turkish foreign-policy goals that undermined NATO priorities in the Middle East. Fourth, the purchase was seen as a quick way to improve ties with Moscow in the wake of the 2015 downed-fighter incident.

In July 2019, Turkey confirmed that delivery of the Russian missile system had commenced. Unsurprisingly, this caused a major crisis with the United States, which maintained that the S-400 system could not be integrated into NATO's defence systems, also stating that Russia could use it to obtain classified military information. However, these protests fell on deaf ears.

The Turkish government believed its missile purchase would deliver political gains at home as it leveraged anti-US public sentiment, presenting the purchase as a distancing from Western security oversight. In December 2020, the US Congress imposed sanctions on the Turkish defence industry; the US also expelled Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme. These developments further increased anti-US sentiment within Turkey.

Turkey's Quarrel With Russia Over Idlib

Despite improving relations between Turkey and Russia since 2016, it has not all been plain sailing. The Syrian city of Idlib, the last stronghold of the Islamist rebels, became a bone of contention between the two. Russia was eager to capture Idlib to end the rebellion against the Assad regime. However, that would have meant thousands of Islamist fighters and their families flooding into Turkey, creating security problems and exacerbating anti-refugee sentiment that was likely to negatively impact the AKP's standing.

The Turkish government established a security perimeter to block Assad's forays into Idlib. Russia responded by killing 33 Turkish soldiers in February 2020 airstrikes. Erdogan, determined to stop the advance on Idlib, decided to visit Moscow, but left feeling that Russia did not consider Turkey

an equal partner. This prompted Turkey to seek US support to contain Russia in Idlib, which was not forthcoming. Turkey was left with no choice but to pursue dialogue with Russia to protect its presence in northern Syria.

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Turkey has tried to remain neutral on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in stark contrast to its NATO allies. The government has closed the Turkish straits to Russian naval vessels and continued selling Bayraktar TB2 drones to Ukraine; these have played a critical role in halting Russian advances in key areas. Turkey is also trying to use the war to re-establish its geopolitical importance within the Western alliance; it has increased dialogue with Ukraine and Russia so as to present itself as a mediator. However, it has not joined Western nations in imposing strict sanctions on Russia and has kept its airspace open to Russian commercial flights.

While the Turkish government sees the war as a chance to mend ties with Western allies, it equally faces economic and domestic challenges that place limits on how far it can manoeuvre. First, the AKP depends on an alliance that includes ultranationalist parties, pro-Russian actors and Islamist factions. Many of the AKP's domestic allies, far from criticising Putin, accuse NATO of provoking Russia on the issue of Ukraine. For instance, the AKP's major partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), blames the United States for supporting NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe – despite Russian protests. Second, the AKP does not want to antagonise Moscow due to its heavy dependency on Russian gas and tourism. Therefore, it has limited its objections to Russian actions.

The Ukraine War Is Redefining the Relationship Between Turkey and NATO

Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted Finland and Sweden to seek NATO membership. But while the United States and other NATO members have been willing to grant this as soon as possible, the Turkish government has been determined to play hardball – and continues to do so in the case of Sweden. It wants to curtail support for Kurdish politicians living in Sweden

while seeking the approval of the United States for another Turkish military operation against the Syrian Kurds, a demand so far rebuffed by the Biden administration. In the meantime, the AKP had been attempting to use the two countries' NATO-membership bids as a bargaining chip to gain approval from the United States to modernise its own F-16 fighter-jet fleet at home. Now that Turkey has approved Finland's NATO membership, the US State Department has accelerated the approval of sales of selected kits needed for the modernisation. On the matter of Sweden, the Turkish government says it could accept the bid if the country stops supporting Kurdish and Gulenist networks.

Turkey Is Moving Closer to Russia

Turkey's role as a mediator during the war means it was a key broker of the grain-export agreement of 2022 between Russia and Ukraine. But the deal did not increase the Turkish government's prestige at home or abroad. In Turkey, hyperinflation has had a devastating effect on people's purchasing power, so voters are not focused on foreign-policy issues, unless they directly relate to Turkey's economic fortunes. The West, meanwhile, is concerned about Erdogan's threats against Greece and his growing domestic authoritarianism. This is forcing the Turkish government to maintain close ties to Russia, seen as one of the few foreign powers that can help Erdogan win the next election by providing cheap energy and injecting much-needed foreign exchange into the economy.

As the country heads into one of the most critical elections in Turkish history, the AKP is likely to continue its cooperation with Russia despite the US threat of sanctions. Turkey participated in the September 2022 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting as an observer, in the presence of both Russia and China. At the meeting, Turkey agreed to pay for 25 per cent of its Russian energy purchases in roubles. Erdogan also permitted the export of Russian products through Turkey to non-Western nations. Additionally, both countries confirmed they would continue working on the Akkuyu nuclear power plant; Russia has sent an estimated \$15 billion to Turkey to cover construction costs.³³ Last but not least, Turkey expressed a desire to foster peace with the Assad regime and to become a full member of the SCO, an announcement that the Biden administration countered by lifting arms-sales restrictions on Cyprus.

10

Turkey's Relations With Central and East Asia

During the Cold War, the Turkish political elite did not prioritise relations with China. Later in the 1980s, the Turkish military junta sought its cooperation, with China considered an alternative economic and security partner to the European Union, which was directing mounting criticism at Turkey over its human-rights record.³⁴ A decade later, however, Turkey's support for the Uyghurs in China became problematic. Moreover, the two differed significantly over the issues of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cyprus.

Leveraging China's Economic Might

As with Russia, the AKP government has bolstered ties with China when it has encountered problems with Western partners. For instance, after cancelling military drills with Israel in 2010 to demonstrate its support for the Palestinians, Turkey invited Chinese military jets to participate in exercises.³⁵ Amid a deterioration in EU ties, the Turkish government became more vocal about joining the SCO. Although China remains wary of Turkish membership of the SCO, it still regards Turkey as a significant participant in its Belt and Road Initiative.³⁶

The AKP government has also explored military cooperation with China despite their differing geopolitical interests in Syria (China supports Assad's regime).³⁷ While Turkey toyed with the idea of purchasing Chinese missile-defence systems in response to the US refusal to sell it Patriot weapons, the Obama administration and US Congress warned Turkey against this course of action on the basis it would risk the collective security of NATO member states. This resulted in the Turkish government abandoning its plan in 2015.

Turkey turned to China as a trade partner when it was criticised by the West in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt. In 2018, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China provided a \$3.6 billion loan package to Turkey to invest in energy and transportation.³⁸ During Covid-19, China's Sinovac vaccine was the first to be delivered to Turkey.

Soft Power and an Export Market in Afghanistan

Turkey shied away from close ties with Afghanistan throughout the Cold War years. More recently, in the 1990s, it provided refuge to General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a leader of Afghanistan's Uzbek community who fought against the Taliban regime.³⁹ Turkey also supported US-led operations against both the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks.

Since then, the AKP government has used soft power to build influence in Afghanistan, selling Turkish soap operas and strengthening infrastructure on the ground, including in education and health, through more than 700 projects.⁴⁰ This is because it has considered Afghanistan a lucrative market for Turkish exports over the past two decades and has even worked to foster ties with the Taliban regime since the US withdrawal in 2021. It also bid for operating rights for Kabul International Airport, losing out to the United Arab Emirates.⁴¹

Close Ties With Pakistan Despite Differences Over Afghanistan

Turkey has viewed Pakistan as an important ally since it gained independence in 1947, with links between the two religious, political and military in nature. In 1955, the two states became members of the Central Treaty Organisation, a regional defence mechanism aimed at containing the Soviet threat. Successive Turkish governments have regarded Pakistan as a reliable friend, although this warm relationship was disrupted in the 1990s because of differing positions on the civil war in Afghanistan. Turkey supported General Dostum's forces while Pakistan backed the Taliban.⁴²

In the aftermath of the 2003 terror attacks in Turkey, the AKP urgently sought cooperation with Pakistan as it increased its counterterrorism efforts. Turkey had become an al-Qaeda target as a result of its military alliance with the West and Israel. Pakistan is also seen as a potential customer for Turkey's emerging military sector, with a strategic-partnership agreement signed to that effect in 2016. Erdogan has since strengthened ties with Pakistan to bolster his positioning of Turkey as leader of the Islamic world. However, this rapprochement with Pakistan has irked Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, nudging India closer to Greece and the Gulf countries to contain Turkey's aspirations in the Eastern Mediterranean.

11

A Big Brother in Africa

Turkey has traditionally kept a distance from sub-Saharan African countries. Turkey's alliance with the West defined its relations with many African nations until the 2000s. For example, Turkey participated in several NATO missions on the continent, especially after the Cold War, including supporting the US-led military operation against the Somalia National Alliance in Mogadishu in 1993. While Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem adopted the African Action Plan five years later to increase Turkey's economic and political presence on the continent, it was under the AKP government that its approach to the region changed.

Turkey as a Trade Partner and Anti-Colonial Big Brother

The Turkish government has sought to diversify its foreign-policy activities, especially since the AKP's second term in power. This has included deepening diplomatic relations with sub-Saharan African countries primarily through the medium of trade. With active government encouragement, Turkish companies have started to explore investment opportunities in the region. Turkey's trade volume with African countries has risen from \$5.4 billion in 2003 to \$34.5 billion in 2021.⁴³ The government has also used Turkish Airlines to facilitate relations and increase cultural and economic exchange; Turkish Airlines flies to 39 countries on the continent, making it a global leader in the African market.

Additionally, the AKP government has used humanitarian and religious institutions to boost its soft-power position in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, it employed the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency to run a humanitarian-aid campaign that responded to the 2011 drought in Somalia. Turkish companies have signed lucrative deals with Somalia to build Mogadishu's international airport and port⁴⁴ as well as hospitals and roads. And Turkey has run annual education programmes for Somali students. These efforts have enabled the AKP to portray Turkey as a strong, humanitarian partner, which has appeal both to citizens of the African region and its conservative and nationalist voters at home. Furthering Turkey's

humanitarian efforts, the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs and government-sponsored civil-society organisations have financed mosque construction in Ghana, Somalia and Nigeria. This policy is strongly in line with the AKP government's neo-Ottomanist foreign-policy ambitions that seek to position Turkey as leader of the Islamic world. However, Turkey's regional presence has not been limited to economic and cultural ties; it has also included hard power.

FIGURE 5

The increasing influence of Turkey on the continent of Africa



- When the civil war began in 2014, Turkey sent drones and foreign mercenaries to Libya to support the Government of National Accord
- In 2022 Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding on oil and gas exploration with Libya
- The number of Turkish embassies in Africa has grown from ten in 2008 to 37 in 2021
- Turkish President Erdogan has visited 30 different African countries
- Turkey's total trade volume with Africa expanded from \$5.4 billion in 2003 to \$34.5 billion in 2021

Military Presence and Drone Diplomacy

The AKP government has not shied away from using its military capabilities as a diplomatic tool. In parts of Africa, it has used them to counter rivals including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates when vying for regional influence. It opened a military training centre in Mogadishu in September 2017⁴⁵ while supporting Somalia in its fight against al-Shabab. In Sudan, the Turkish government signed a 2018 agreement to invest in a new port on Suakin Island, as part of a Turkish military facility, although its political influence there has been significantly weakened since the government of Omar al-Bashir was overthrown by the Sudanese military in 2019, backed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Other African countries with which Turkey has signed military-cooperation agreements include Ethiopia, Niger and Senegal.

As Turkey has increased its arms production, the government has increasingly turned to sub-Saharan Africa as a market for exports. Bayraktar TB2 drones, produced by a company owned by Erdogan's son-in-law, have been placed at the centre of its trade in the region. However, the use of Turkish weapons in Africa has not always benefited Ankara.⁴⁶ For example, the Ethiopian army's use of Turkish drones against rebels in the Tigray region caused civilian deaths, which attracted negative media attention.⁴⁷

Both Togo and Niger have also recently purchased Bayraktar TB2 drones to tackle Islamist militants and insurgent groups. There was public support for the purchases in both nations, based on the view that using Turkish technology could reduce the need for security partnerships with France. However, this irked President Emmanuel Macron's administration. Mali has become another hot spot in the regional competition between France and Turkey. The AKP government has portrayed itself as an equal partner, one that is anti-colonial, while presenting France as a neo-colonial power. For example, Turkey acted swiftly to recognise the anti-French coup in Mali in 2020 against President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who had strong ties with Macron. Moreover, the AKP government has used the state-sponsored Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) World channel to reach audiences on the continent. The television channel has been portraying Turkey as a "beneficial partner" that seeks to improve education, health-care and agricultural standards in Africa,⁴⁸ while depicting France as an imperial power that uses "war on terror" narratives to increase its military presence in the Sahel

region.⁴⁹ It also criticised Macron's comments on "civilisational" problems in African nations.⁵⁰ Turkey's geopolitical interests in the region are considered a rising threat among the French.

Turkey's active foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa has also provoked other responses. For instance, Turkey's military and financial presence in Somalia and Sudan has alarmed rivals such as the United Arab Emirates. In the Somali elections in May 2022, the United Arab Emirates-backed candidate Hassan Sheikh Mohamud defeated the Turkish-backed President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed. Since 2020, the AKP government has sought to repair relations with France, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates but it has been difficult for Turkey to discard its reputation as a rival in this region of Africa.

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Conclusion

Although Turkey's rapprochement with the West arose from its desire to protect itself from Soviet aggression after the second world war, the alliance between the two has been a long-term characteristic of its foreign policy. This doesn't mean the relationship has been free of strain or animosity at times, periods in which Turkey has looked to diversify its foreign-policy ties.

Under successive AKP-led governments over the past 20 years, Turkey has grown in self-confidence to expand its zone of influence to the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans. These ambitions have been met with resistance and, sometimes, outright aggression from regional and international powers. In turn, Turkey has attempted to counter by creating ad-hoc alliances. Under these circumstances, Russia, which has become an instrumental partner in certain contexts, has also been a significant rival in others. Still, Turkey has used its Russian ties as leverage against the United States when the latter has declined to play along with Turkish interests in the Middle East. It is hardly a coincidence that the strengthening of the relationship with Russia coincides with a deteriorating one with the United States.

Today, Turkey's foreign-policy ambitions have reached their limit and are faltering. The gap between the government's ambitions and its military and economic capabilities is growing wider. This has seen Turkey enter a new period during which its president has attempted to mend relations with some rivals, including, but not limited to, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. For instance, it has recently repaired ties with Israel to end its isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean and contain Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the Turkish government has been cooperating with Jewish lobbies in Washington to reduce anti-Turkish sentiment there.

The first reason for this policy shift is Turkey's increasing regional isolation. The second is economic. For example, the normalisation of Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in 2022 is partially motivated by the Turkish government's urgent need for loans and investment for its faltering economy. Following visits by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman

of Saudi Arabia and Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates in 2022, pro-government newspapers in Turkey portrayed them as a success that would result in billions of dollars of investment.⁵¹ This has not yet materialised. In fact, Turkey's biggest transaction with a foreign country last year was Russia's investment of \$15 billion to cover the construction costs of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant.

While Turkey has lost some interest in building an Islamic alliance with Afghanistan and Pakistan, it now wants to play a more active role in the Caucasus and Central Asia, with the AKP shifting between nationalist and pan-Islamist policies on an opportunistic basis. More enthusiasm for boosting economic and political ties with Turkic nations such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan can be expected, a move designed not only to generate financial gains but also target nationalist and conservative Turkish voters ahead of the elections. What is still unclear is how Russia and China will react to the Turkish quest for more influence in Central Asia.

Ahead of the 2023 elections, the Turkish government is desperate for economic assistance, not least to slow down inflation and decelerate the depreciation of the Turkish lira. Driven by the pressing goal of economic relief, no matter how temporary, the AKP could be backed into short-term approaches on foreign policy. In the absence of access to the West's financial resources, Turkey will turn harder towards the Russians, negotiating lower energy prices and more favourable loans. In return, Turkey will be expected to assist Russian efforts to limit the impact of financial sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and the European Union in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Still, its pragmatism will result in backtracking should the costs of supporting Russia to circumnavigate economic sanctions outweigh those of angering the West on this issue.

The following insights provide an overview of the direction that Turkey's foreign policy could take depending on the outcome of the May 2023 elections:

- Turkey's close relationship with Russia will continue – at the least – into the summer. If the opposition alliance wins the elections, Western policymakers can expect Turkey to become a more reliable NATO member and ally. If the current government wins, Turkish pragmatism and foreign-policy opportunism will continue under the AKP. In this scenario, the government will retain close Russian ties unless it is able to secure major concessions from the West, especially support for its faltering economy.
- If the opposition wins, its leaders will aim to improve Turkey's relationships with neighbours in the Middle East, including Iran, Syria and Iraq. This initiative could attract support from the European Union, which needs to stem refugee arrivals caused by instability in the Middle East. However, a possible peace plan between Turkey and Iran would anger the Republicans in the United States as well as Israel and the Gulf nations.
- Turkey will continue playing an active role in the Russia-Ukraine war. As one of the few nations that can still talk to leaders in both Ukraine and Russia, its position here should not be undermined or underestimated. As the war in Ukraine continues, Western policymakers should look for ways to leverage this Turkish role.
- Turkey is likely to continue stalling Sweden's membership of NATO in the short term while it seeks additional concessions from both Sweden and the United States.
- Turkey's main concern in Syria has shifted from regime change to the neutralisation of the Syrian Kurds. Western policymakers should assuage Turkish concerns on security otherwise more Turkish military operations in Syria remain a possibility.

During the past decade, there has been a clear correlation between the AKP's increasing authoritarian tendencies and its shift away from the West. With a view to incentivising Turkey's realignment, regardless of which party wins the elections, Western leaders should consider a new platform for engagement – underpinned by strong institutional mechanisms – which acknowledges the country's strategic position in the world.

More specifically, in the absence of any likelihood that Turkey will join the European Union soon, an alternative institutional arrangement could be based on enhanced investment and trade developed on the back of the existing customs union between Turkey and the European Union. This arrangement could be extended to US and UK involvement. The United Kingdom is well placed to serve in a mediating role between Turkey and the United States to pave the way for such stronger investment and trade ties.

A potential model is the recently created Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. Led by the United States, the 14-member framework focuses on enhanced trade, supply-chain resilience, infrastructure and clean energy as well as anti-corruption. While this framework does not explicitly mention China, the platform is undoubtedly underpinned by a US desire to better compete with Chinese influence in that region. Similarly, a new framework with Turkey in partnership with the European Union and the United Kingdom could serve to reduce Turkey's economic reliance on Russia and build a durable alliance that transcends ad-hoc geopolitical interests.

About the Authors

TARIK BASBUGOGLU

Tarik Basbugoglu is a research associate at Glasgow Caledonian University as part of the European Commission's Horizon 2020-funded project, DeRadicalisation in Europe and Beyond: Detect, Resolve, Reintegrate. He is an expert on Turkish politics, US foreign policy and wider Middle Eastern studies, and has written and presented regularly about Turkish foreign policy and politics in relation to the Syrian civil war.

UMUT KORKUT

Umut Korkut is a professor of International Politics at Glasgow Caledonian University. He currently leads the European Commission's Horizon 2020-funded project, DeRadicalisation in Europe and Beyond: Detect, Resolve, Reintegrate. He is a co-author of the book, *Politics and Gender Identity in Turkey: Centralised Islam for Socio-Economic Control* (2017).

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- 6 Since 1962, successive US administrations had urged Turkey to restrict the farmland used to cultivate opium poppies to control international drug production. The United States increased pressure on Turkey by highlighting that opium, the main ingredient in heroin, which was produced in Anatolia, was then exported to the United States. It promised to send economic aid if Turkey restricted opium cultivation, but this constituted the main income for Anatolia's farmers. Ahead of the 1973 election, Bulent Ecevit, the CHP leader, pledged to lift the opium ban to appeal to farmers in Turkey, following through on this promise in 1974 once he was prime minister. In response the US Congress, under the administration of President Richard Nixon, imposed economic sanctions and a military embargo.
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