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Domestic Politics and Regional Dynamics in Turkey's Geopolitical Approach to the Middle East Between 2002-2019

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ABSTRACT

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Isolation

During the last two decades, key reforms in social, economic, and political structures have elevated Turkey into a rising regional power. In the Middle East, the increasing influence of Turkey for a better part of the last two decades has been reinforced by its humanitarian oriented foreign policy. Whereas this transformation is extensively attributed to the reform agenda by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the last decade has proved to be challenging for Turkey's foreign policy stance. Regional dynamics, such as the Syrian civil war, Qatar crisis, and the Kurdish question, have influenced Turkey to gradually shift from its previous subtle to a more assertive foreign policy. Additionally, the frequent domestic political challenges and economic pressure on the AKP government have only pushed Turkey further towards a more assertive Middle East foreign policy. This article examines how regional and domestic political developments are influencing Turkish foreign policy approach. The analysis will attempt to provide a comprehensive perspective on why Turkish geopolitical engagement and an increasingly assertive foreign policy that is characterised by unilateralism particularly in the pursuit of national and regional security is leading to its isolation.

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Introduction

Since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, successive Turkish administrations guided by the principles of Kemal Ataturk embarked on modernising the Republic. While Kemalism¹ led to the establishment of closer ties between Turkey and western powers, minimal attention was given towards the Middle East. Turkey's path toward modernisation required strict emulation of European progressiveness in key sectors such as the military, economy, science, education, and legal organisation (Jung, 2001). However, despite the attempts of the Kemalist government to advance a liberal agenda and align its modernisation programme with the Western model, it remained very suspicious of the West (Aybey, 2004). For instance, despite the existence of the Sevres Treaty², no Turkish parliament has ever passed its provisions. Nonetheless, the engagement of Turkey with the West does not imply that the Middle East was completely ignored. On the contrary, Turkey was among the first countries to recognise

¹ Kemalism is a modernization philosophy which guided the transition between the multi-religious, multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire to the secular, unitary Republic of Turkey.

² Sevres Treaty was signed between the Allied powers and Ottoman Empire after World War I on August 10, 1920. The treaty partitioned the Ottoman Empire to the Allied powers and granted autonomy to the Kurds and Armenians

newly established Arab states after World War II, and in 1947 supported the Arab course in protesting against the division of Palestine (Candar *et al.*, 2001).

The beginning of the 21st century is crucial to understanding Turkey in the context of Middle East geopolitics. This is because, since 2002, Turkey embarked on an aggressive reform agenda (domestic and foreign) including building its soft power capabilities by providing significant humanitarian support to countries such as Iraq and Syria and instituting more bilateral and cordial ties with other states in the region. During the first decade of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule, domestic economic development and improving democratic space endeared Turkey not only to the region but also to the international community.

This improved image gave Turkey some aspects of legitimacy outside the confines of its territorial borders. Turkey's influence expanded significantly, and its proactive foreign policy was manifested in attempts to mediate regional conflicts in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. The AKP government exploited its appealing image to call for political reforms throughout the region on issues such as human rights and emphasised the urgent need for the region to democratise (Statesman, 2004). Indeed, the pursuit of national interests coupled by rapidly transforming geopolitical dynamics meant that the Middle East was no longer just a ground for Turkey to engage as a mediator in conflicts, but rather, as an actor that institutes order and stability. According to Davutoğlu (2010), Turkey shifted from approaching the Middle East as a region representing its interests to a region representing Turkish influence in international politics.

However, it is imperative to note that since 2002, there has also been a systematic rediscovery of the Ottoman socio-cultural and religious consciousness. AKP rule stimulated a burgeoning of Turkish Muslim elites who regard Kemalism in foreign policy as challenging to Turkey and as such, advocate for the subordination of ethnic identity in favour of an inclusive religious and civilisational identity (*umma*). This group, therefore, supported closer ties with the Middle East (Robins, 2007; Marcus, 2009). Indeed, the victory of AKP in 2002 was not only a sign of protest by the Turkish voters against years of economic mismanagement, corruption, and rising household poverty but, it also symbolised increased concerns over the deterioration of national values founded on Islamic socio-cultural and religious identity (Warning *et al.*, 2011).

In one opinion column published by *Turkish Daily News* (8 March 2003), the conflicts in the Middle East were described as a source of agony for Turkish citizens who share deep historical and socio-cultural relations with the region and as such, the author argued, Turkey needed to take bold measures in engaging with the region to restore order. Rabasa *et al.*, (2008) emphasise that this shift did not constitute attempts to Islamize Turkish approach to the geopolitics of the Middle East even though the new policy was influenced by religious identity and cultural solidarity. The deep re-engagement with the Middle East has influenced an assertive foreign policy in which Turkey has demonstrated its willingness to take pre-emptive actions before any perceived threats have materialised. Although Turkey has often insisted that its actions are rational relative to its national interests, the projection of its strength through its military industry has attracted criticisms from its allies. This article will therefore attempt to demonstrate how the transformation from early Kemalist inclined to a “neo-Ottoman” foreign policy has created tensions between Turkey, Middle Eastern neighbours and its traditional Western allies. The article argues that these tensions have gradually led to a pattern of international isolation of Turkey.

Defining Geopolitics

Geopolitics is a core subject matter in discussions and analyses of political discourses by academicians, strategists, journalists, and political analysts. The end of the Cold War created far-reaching changes in the structure of the international system. The subtle foreign policies projected by small and middle power states during the Cold War era is best captured by Kaplan (1968) who argues that a tight bipolar international system of two superpowers dominating international politics leaves minimal room for smaller powers to manoeuvre. In other words, in the post-Cold War order, the structure of the international system transformed into a multipolar global order. In this new setting, geopolitics has become a core element of international politics.

According to Cohen (2003), key elements of geopolitical discourse can be traced back to classical scholars such as Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hegel, and Montesquieu. However, it was not until 1899 that Rudolf Kjellen introduced geopolitics into the mainstream discussions of political concepts as a form of

political identity and expression of interests by the state (Tuathail *et al.*, 1996; Dodds *et al.*, 2000). Notably, during this period, there was an expansion of European imperialism stemming out from economic, military, political, humanitarian, and religious reasons, as well as the acceptance of a new Social Darwinism theory to justify and legitimise colonial expansion. In this context, geography was promoted as a scientific field, and intellectual thinkers advanced the idea of geography in influencing a state's foreign policy.

Sloan *et al.* (1999) define geopolitics as the influence of a state's political and economic geography on politics, power, and foreign policy. Cohen (2003) defines geopolitics as the examination of the relationships between geographical perspectives and settings and the existing political processes. As such, geopolitics provides a platform through which the effects of these interactions (geographical settings and political processes) are addressed. Actors involved in the formulation of foreign policies, therefore, ought to be equipped with the capabilities to identify the interactions between geography and political processes.

Turkey's Socio-Cultural Identity and Geographical Location in Middle East Geopolitics

Understanding the geopolitical influence of Turkey in the Middle East requires a comprehensive understanding of Turkey in the context of its demography and geographical location. The power of a state is measured in terms of capabilities that can be ranked according to strength in areas such as population size, territory, military power, economic, and political influence (Carr, 1979). A report by the UN Population Division (UNPD, 2019) shows that Turkey's population has increased to 82 million to become the most populous state in the Middle East and the second in Europe after Germany. This means that Turkey has also become a significant producer and consumer of goods and services for the Middle East region.

Secondly, religious and cultural identity is a key factor when it comes to how Turkey approached the Middle East during the early years of AKP rule. In this period, through the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA), Turkey developed its humanitarian aid foreign policy tool to establish close ties not only across the Middle East but also in Asia and Africa. According to a study by Dağ (2016), foreign aid to countries with a Muslim population diversified, and the amount of aid increased considerably. Although foreign aid (humanitarian aid) to countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Somalia, Palestine and Iraq seem to have been as a result of strategic policies, it is an undeniable fact that an important factor in terms of selectivity is religion as a common denominator.

But more importantly, is the demography of this population with regard to the Kurds. According to statistics by the CIA World Factbook (2018), the Kurdish population in Turkey is approximated to constitute 18 per cent of the total population. This is a significant factor for Turkish geopolitical approach to the Middle East because sections of the Kurdish population have been pushing for secession from Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. In Turkey, this secessionist agenda is being fronted by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that wants to establish an independent ethnic state of Kurdish people in the region (Jongerden, 2008). This demography and the political relevance attached to it has transformed Turkey's domestic politics and foreign policy. The PKK terror organisation has not only caused immense suffering on innocent civilians in its war with the Turkish state but also, redefined how politics is conducted in the country. Inadvertently, countering the threat of PKK empowered certain institutions such as the military; redefined the boundaries between state and society, and significantly slowed down the democratisation process in Turkey- thereby serving the interest of certain sections of the state bureaucracy.

The conflict between the state and the secessionist groups in Turkey has led to a mass movement of Kurds from conflict-affected areas either willingly or through force to other areas in western Anatolian cities. For Turkey, its complex socio-cultural demography has become a sensitive issue that has rendered the state in a dilemma over national interests of territorial integrity and security, with the commitment balancing friendly relations with neighbouring states in the region such as Syria and Iraq. Any approach to the Kurdish problem is carefully handled to avoid communalization of the conflict with PKK as one that is between ethnic Kurds and Turks. The government has had to seek means of distinguishing and separating the problem of PKK terror organisation from other legitimate issues of the Kurds who have often decried about their marginalisation.

To an extent, therefore, this article recognises that Turkey's approach to the geopolitics of the Middle East is attached to the structural transformation arising from a redefined understanding of the region's social and political identity by the ruling political class. Davutoğlu's doctrine (2009) that has perhaps influenced part of

the contemporary approach of Turkey to the Middle East highlights the role of identity in Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East. Nonetheless, the influence of identity in Turkish geopolitical approach does not exist as a singular factor but one amongst other structural realities such as the distribution of power in the region.

Geographic Location

Turkey's geographical location provides both enviable opportunities and challenges. Turkey is between south-western Asia and south-eastern Europe with the lands west of the Bosphorus constituting part of European geography. Turkey borders the Black Sea between Georgia and Bulgaria and the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea between Syria and Greece.

Figure 1: Turkey's Geo-Strategic Location and Geopolitical Vectors



Source: Geopolitical Intelligence Services, (2018)

According to Çelik *et al.*, (1999), Turkey's geographical location gives it control over the strategic points of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles straits, therefore, making Turkey a key player in the geopolitics of the Middle East, Asia, Eastern Europe, and post-Soviet independent states in the region. However, Turkey's location has also subjected it to an environment of different characteristics, ideologies, and state regimes with competing interests. These multivariate factors, therefore, necessitate Turkey to engage actively in the region to pursue, defend or maintain its national interests. A commentary in the *Hürriyet Daily News* (26 October 2009) postulates that the reintegration of Turkey into Arab geopolitics is a strategic decision by the Turkish government. Oran (2001) argues that Turkey's geographic location has been at the crossroads of global power axes – during the Cold War bipolar power structure and, in contemporary times, as a North-South axis divide modelled upon economic development. Turkey's strategic geographical location has therefore been beneficial, on the one hand, for projecting its influence in the Middle East in a higher capacity than its relative geographical size, economic capacity, and population would permit (Aydin, 2004). On the other hand, this strategic location also poses a serious security threat to Turkey. Terrorist groups such as the PKK live among the Kurdish population that have settled along and across the borders of Turkey with neighbouring countries Iran, Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the central location of Turkey at the crossroad of Europe and the Middle East has exposed the country to illegal migration routes to Europe, as well as a hub for human trafficking.

Influence of Turkish Domestic Politics to its Geopolitical Approach to the Middle East

This article argues that transformation in the domestic political ideology has significantly influenced Turkey's approach to geopolitics in the Middle East. Major political developments since 2002 continue to influence Turkish foreign policy agenda in terms of policy formulation and motives. Some of these major domestic political developments include the AKP electoral win in 2002; the beginning of the EU accession talks in 2005; Oslo negotiations with the PKK from 2006-09; the collapse of the Kurdish peace talks in 2014; and a coup attempt in 2016. The essence of these developments is that they changed the political identity of the AKP and redefined how the government approached both domestic policy and foreign policy that shifted towards more engagement with the Middle East.

According to Waldman *et al.*, (2017), after AKP came to power in 2002, the beginning of orienting Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East was in line with the popular opinion amongst the AKP's support base comprised of small and medium-scale conservative Muslim business entrepreneurs from the Anatolian provinces. AKP was itself established as the democratic, conservative and non-confessional movement by former President Abdullah Gül and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Its foundation nonetheless is connected to the increasing role of Islam in Turkish life experienced from the beginning of the 1980s and '90s. These conservative business entrepreneurs were profiting from increased cross-border trade and valued the shared religious identity consciousness with countries in the Middle East. To address the interests of this strong emerging middle class, AKP regime even advocated for a regional market similar to the European Schengen model and proposed easing travel restrictions such as visa requirements and establishing the region's own "Sham-gen" (Kirişçi *et al.*, 2011). This new drive led to increased trade and growing economic cooperation with other states such as the Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran, that provided profitable markets for the Turkish construction industry.

Secondly, domestic political and institutional reforms by the AKP regime that characterised this period attracted massive recognition for Turkey not only within the Middle East but also across the western hemisphere. Turkey was lauded for its reform agenda, and Ankara became a model and a source of inspiration for liberal Arabs as well as other religious conservative groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, who were attracted to the regime's embrace of Islamism blended with people-centred economic development that lifted Turkey to an upper-middle-income country in a span of a decade (Altunışık, 2010). The political ideology of AKP fused fundamental principles of Islam with democratic and free-market principles. The AKP regime, while opening its domestic market for prospective investments from the Middle East and other regions in the different sectors of the economy, also intensified its campaign for good governance and respect for human rights and freedoms across the region. Turkey highlighted the plight of other states such as Palestine and opened its borders to Syrian refugees escaping from conflict. Several studies (Robins, 2003; Hale, 2012; White, 2014) take note that AKP internalised the Kemalist vision of establishing a strong state with the capacity to deter external threats and overcome aggressors when challenged in direct confrontations. This strong image portrayed Turkey as a natural leader in the Middle East (Bechev, 2017).

Thirdly, the formation of a coalition between the AKP and the Gülenist movement also impacted the foreign policy stance adopted by Turkey towards the Middle East. The coalition ensured a parliamentary majority in 2007, thereby giving the AKP government assertive and absolute mandate over the formulation of foreign policy. The influence of the Gülenist movement in the Turkey's judicial system offered ideal protection for AKP's religious conservatism ideology against attacks by Turkey secular establishments. More importantly, AKP gained control of not only the executive but also the legislature and council of ministers. However, coalition differences between in 2012 allowed AKP to be no longer confined by the interests of its coalition partner and therefore, able to develop more aggressive or proactive foreign policy agenda. It is important to note that although the AKP and the Gülenist movement previously formed a coalition, both sides had different views on how the new era of the Republic ought to be. Gülenists were preoccupied with advancing a more transnational economic-oriented and soft-power foreign policy agenda while the AKP preferred a more expansive foreign policy within the framework of conservative democratic practices. As such, having established a large network of supporters at home and abroad through groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and other conservative democratic groups, the AKP government became more confident in advancing its proactive foreign policy in the region. For instance, Turkey provided significant support to the Arab Springs that emerged to consolidate democracy across states in the Middle East and North Africa (Aktürk, 2017).

Internal political squabbles such as the Kurdish question advanced by the PKK continue to fundamentally influence the Turkish approach to geopolitics, particularly in regard to the question of territorial integrity and national security. The Kurds have issued proposals and demands ranging from the recognition of cultural rights and freedoms to the establishment of federalism as a political system in Turkey. More radical demands have been calls for nationalism that have taken the extreme form of terrorism against Turkey and moderate Kurds by PKK since 1984. The connection between the PKK, which has been designated as a terrorist group by the EU, US, NATO, and Turkey, and the Kurdish population in Turkey remains a challenge to Turkish foreign policy to the Middle East, especially in relation to countries such as Iraq and Syria. According to Yavuz (2015), because of domestic politics in Turkey, AKP did not have a policy towards the Kurdish question during the 2002 elections as it attempted to avoid criticism and potential loss of support from Turkish Grassroot nationalists and conflict with the military. Within the Turkish security apparatus, military regime, and civilian bureaucracy, there were devoted anti-Kurdish state sentiments thwarting any attempts towards establishing a lasting solution to the Kurdish question (Çandar, 2009).

The influence of domestic politics can also be seen during the invasion of Iraq by the United States. Having won elections in December 2002 with a parliamentary majority of 363 members, the legislation of foreign policy bills was expected to be easier, considering that unlike coalition governments, one-party governments tend to be disciplined and advantageous in parliamentary proceedings (Hekimoğlu, 2009). However, despite intense lobbying by both Erdoğan and Gül, the Turkish parliament failed to pass the 1st March 2003 bill that provided for a Resolution regarding America's use of Turkish territory in its war against Saddam Hussein. This was because Parliament had opposed the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration on the basis that the invasion lacked international legitimacy. *Hürriyet Daily News* (2 March 2017) reported that the resolution would have permitted the deployment of 250 US warcraft, use of 5 seaports, deployment of an estimated 80,000 US troops, and additional use of 13 airports in Turkey against Iraq.

Perhaps a more assertive influence of domestic politics on the geopolitical approach of Turkey is the failed 2016 coup attempt by the Gülenists terror group (FETÖ) that attempted overthrow the democratically elected AKP government. The aftermath of the failed coup attempt led to allegations by AKP that key government institutions such as the military, judiciary, public service and other state security organs had been infiltrated by the Gülenists. AKP further alleged that the government bureaucracy was hesitant to take initiatives that would guarantee national security interests of the state. Thus, the coup attempt initiated the beginning of a raft of radical changes in government institutions and organs. This restructuring included the declaration of war on terrorism domestically against the Gülenist movement and across the Middle East region against PKK and its affiliate groups such as People's Protection Units (YPG). Turkey has resorted to using hard power in securing its borders as witnessed in the launch of military operations such as Operation Euphrates Shield against ISIS in Syria and Operation Olive Branch against the PKK affiliated YPG. The revision of the Syrian policy to one that is focused on eliminating the threat of the Syrian Democratic Forces has been supported by a majority of the Turkish citizens who accept this war as an extension of the fight against PKK. This domestic support became more steadfast after leaked documents in 2013 alleged that Abdullah Öcalan³ who is the imprisoned PKK leader, contributed to the establishment of Syrian Defence Forces.

Threats of sanctions from US and EU members against Turkey's military operations in Syria have only resulted in more domestic political support for the government and thereby becoming even bolder in executing the Syrian policy. The success of two previous military operations strengthened the Turkish position in Syria and emboldened Turkey to conduct another unilateral military offensive (Operation Claw) to create a safe zone along the Turkey-Iraq border despite continued condemnation by the international community. The emerging unilateral approach to security demonstrates Turkey's resolve to approach the region using hard power should it deem that its national interests are under threat as well as serve as a basis for AKP to galvanise its domestic political support.

Is Turkey's Geopolitical Approach Leading to its Isolation?

Over the last decade, Turkey has experienced unprecedented changes in its domestic politics and witnessed a far-reaching transformation in regional dynamics of the Middle East. Since 2010, there have been concerns of increasing religious-conservatism and growing authoritarianism (Karaveli, 2016); entrenchment of

³ Formed the PKK in 1984 and has been under solitary confinement since 1999 in a maximum-security facility on the small island of Imrali.

nationalism (Haynes, 2010); and a confrontational slant in political conduct. Additionally, Turkey has undergone political disturbances such as the Gezi Park protests in 2013 (Gürçan *et al.*, 2014; Carkoğlu, 2015); collapse of the Kurdish peace process in 2014 (Lindenstrauss, 2016); an attempted coup in 2016 (Öktem, 2016); and a constitutional referendum introducing an executive presidency in 2017 (Aytaç *et al.*, 2017). On the regional front, the Middle East has experienced the Arab Springs that emerged in 2011 (Springborg, 2011); increased threats of terrorism from ISIS, PKK, and other outlawed militia groups; the intervention of external actors in Syria (Cheterian, 2015); the KRG independence in 2017; and the Qatar crisis in 2017 (Aras *et al.*, 2017).

One significant impact of the domestic political developments in Turkey is that they have provided an avenue through which President Erdoğan has assumed stronger executive powers granting him a full monopoly over Turkish foreign policy. On the regional front, these developments have increased Turkey's resolve to pursue an independent national security policy and, notably, caused Turkey to resort to using hard power in addressing key geopolitical issues that threaten its national interests. This stance is coherent by realists' arguments on the security of states. According to Mearsheimer (2001), the principal goal of states is to achieve hegemonic status and therefore, states should utilise any window that changes the distribution of capabilities even if such actions may jeopardise their survival. The underlying argument is that the primary objective of states is survival, and outside this, all other goals are considered secondary. In other words, the behaviour of a state cannot be derived from ethical underpinnings but rather from predicted consequences. The pre-emptive military decisions taken by the Turkish government appears to be premised on this perception. For Turkey, striking first against perceived threats to its national security is the surest way for the state to guarantee its survival.

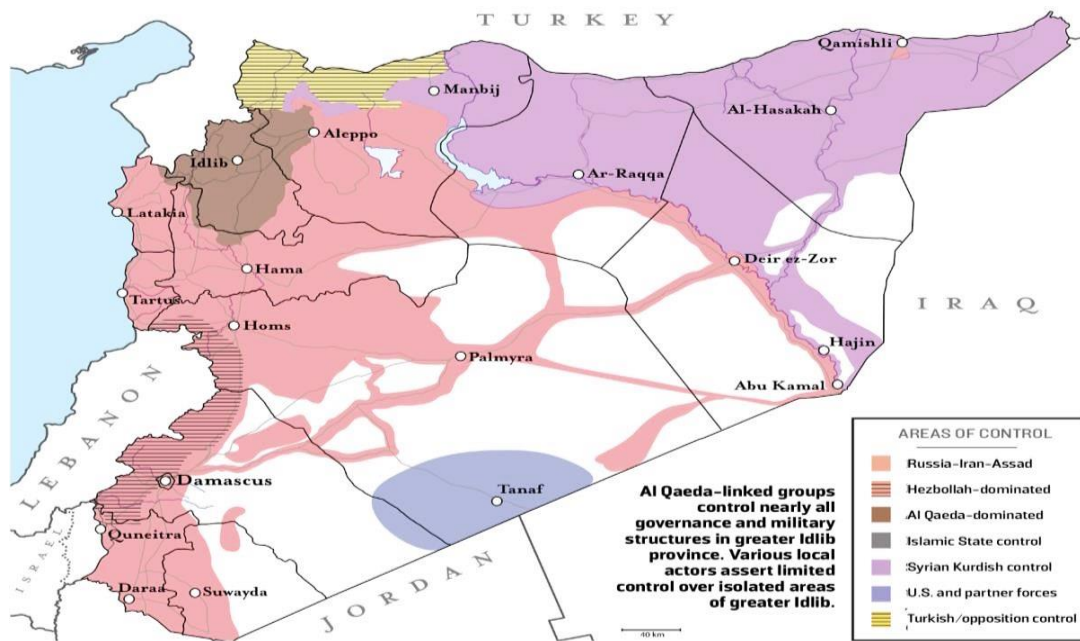
Previously, the approach of Turkey to the Middle East geopolitics was synchronised with the stance taken by the EU, Israel, and the United States (Davutoğlu, 2008). However, Turkey has since increased bilateral ties through strategic engagements with Russia, Iran, and China, thereby extensively changing the dynamics of Middle East geopolitics (Akturk, 2015). The growing opposition of Turkey by its traditional Western allies has created a security dilemma, and Turkey has responded to this by strengthening its position through establishment of unofficial alliances with other regional powers such as Russia and Iran. Turkey's change in attitude toward its Western allies can also be attributed to a new 'Eurasianist' ideology postulating that Turkey can be an equal, if not dominant, a partner in the Middle East and the larger Eurasia (Lin, 2016). This article highlights three cases that demonstrate how Turkey has responded to the new geopolitical dynamics in the region while pursuing national interest.

1. The Syrian Complexities

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Syria has played host to external interventions by Turkey, the US, Russia, and Iran (Humud *et al.*, 2016). On the one hand, both Turkey and the United States have been critical of the Assad regime while Russia and Iran have supported the status quo by providing critical support for the Assad regime (Charap, 2013). However, the approach proposed by Turkey and the US has been a source of conflict between the two NATO allies. This is because US resorted to providing financial, technical, and military hardware support to anti-Assad rebels such as the YPG and the Syrian Defence Forces (constituted of Arab and Kurdish forces) which have been fighting the Islamic State. But for Turkey, YPG is a designated terrorist organisation because of its affiliation to PKK, which continues to threaten Turkish national security (Salih, 2015). Additionally, Turkey has been supporting the non-Kurdish opposition groups and fighting alongside the Free Syrian Army against ISIS in Northern Syria through operations such as the *Euphrates Shield*⁴ and *Olive Branch*⁵. From the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the underlying agenda has been constructed from a natural security and territorial integrity perspective in which Turkey is opposed to any post-war settlement that would attempt to grant territorial autonomy to the Kurds in Northern Syria because this would threaten Turkish territorial sovereignty.

⁴ OES was launched on August 24, 2016 to establish border security; to push DAESH away from the border line and prevent DAESH attacks particularly against border provinces); and to block the YPG/PKK, a PKK offspring in Syria, from carving out a corridor by taking control of the east-west line in the north of Syria.

⁵ On January 20, 2018, Turkey, in cooperation with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), launched Operation Olive Branch with the stated aim of eliminating the PYD/PKK and Daesh terrorist presence in Syria's northern Afrin district.

Figure 3. Spheres of influence in Syria

Source: *Institute for the Study of War, 2019*

Russia's backing of the Bashar Assad regime is purely anchored on its Middle Eastern interests. By giving the Assad government military assistance in the form of troops, weapons, airstrikes, and diplomatic support at the United Nations, Russia has been providing lifeline support to the government of Syria as it seeks to maintain influence in the region covertly through the Assad administration. Syria is key to Russia as it holds its military base in Latakia and another naval base in Tartus port (Bodansky, 2016). Iran has also been a key ally of Assad by sharing key intelligence and providing military aid to the Syrian government and military training to government forces to counter the Syrian opposition forces and ISIS (Allison, 2013). For Iran, Syria is a key ally against Israel and Saudi Arabia, and even more importantly, Syria acts as a key partner by providing support to Hezbollah, which counters Israel in Lebanon.

Since the civil war began, Turkey has also been the host of over 4 million Syrian refugees. Even though the public opinion on Turkish government support of Syrian refugees was high during the earlier years of conflict, Syrian refugees have become a politicised issue in Turkey with the government coming under intense pressure and criticism to change its Syrian policy. Economic problems characterised by high unemployment rates, financial crisis (weakening of the lira), and high rates of inflation have increased anti-refugee sentiments in the country. Consequently, the refugee crisis in Turkey, as well as the differences in agendas pursued by both Russia and the US which do not align with the interests of Turkey, have influenced the government to formulate a unilateral foreign policy in Syria characterised by conducting military operations in strategic areas such as Afrin and Manbij against ISIS, PKK, and YPG.

2. The Qatar Crisis and Gulf Relations

Following the Qatar Crisis, tensions have been rife within the Arabian Peninsula. The tough stance taken by the Saudi-led coalition to Qatar is due to the allegations that Qatar has been supporting terrorist groups, warming up to Iran, and spreading propaganda through the Al-Jazeera broadcasting agency. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cut their diplomatic ties with Qatar, Turkey voiced regrets to the Gulf countries and advocated for resolving thorny issues through dialogue and negotiations. Turkey also expressed willingness to contribute to solving the crisis through mediation because it was concerned with the stability of the Gulf region particular that of Qatar which is one of the leading foreign direct investment country in Turkey (Manyuan, 2018).

Notably, whereas the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt maintain tense relations with Turkey, other states in the Gulf such as Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait view Turkey as a logical and responsible partner. During the crisis, Turkey condemned sanctions and measures taken by the three Gulf countries against Qatar as unacceptable and “inhumane”, and President Erdoğan was quoted equating the sanctions against Qatar with the “death penalty” (Al-monitor, 2017). Turkey reiterated a commitment to strengthening and developing relations with Qatar. This commitment benefited Qatar by providing Turkish economic support in the form of food supplies to address emerging shortages in the Qatari markets. Additionally, on June 8, 2016, parliament ratified an agreement paving the way for the deployment of Turkish troops to Qatar. The breakdown of bilateral ties between Turkey and UAE was several reasons such as the continuous criticisms of Turkey by UAE for creating a buffer zone in North-Eastern Syria; Ankara's support for Qatar; competing interests in the Horn of Africa (Somalia); and, Ankara's close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is deemed as threatening to the status quo in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, and Bahrain (Ramadan, 2011). The failed attempt by Turkey to mediate in the Gulf crisis became just another case that demonstrates its fading influence in Middle East geopolitics.

Turkey's decision to support Qatar during this crisis at the expense of the Saudi-led coalition was not just out of “brotherly solidarity” but because of the significance of Qatar to Turkey in the region. First, the sanctions and embargo placed on Qatar could potentially have an extensive negative impact of the economy of Qatar and thereby reduce Qatari investments in Turkey. The investment of Qataris is estimated at more than USD 20 billion and is spread across agricultural, tourism, real estate, and banking sectors. Secondly, Qatar is considered a close ally by Turkey because of their bilateral foreign policy approaches in the region, as evidenced in the Syria conflict, Iraq, Libya, and their support for movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. This article argues that the emergence of the Qatar crisis influenced the establishment of a Turkey-Iran-Qatar alliance in the region to counter the Saudi Arabia-UAE-Egypt alliance in the Middle East geopolitics. Secondly, this crisis has intensified efforts by Turkey to restore and strengthen bilateral ties with other Gulf states such as Kuwait to restore good relations in the region.

3. The Kurdish Question and PKK Counterterrorism

The Kurdish question has been one of the critical issues plaguing the Turkish government for several decades (Bacik *et al.*, 2011). However, despite earlier efforts by the Turkish government to use soft power policies in an attempt to address the Kurdish question (*Çözüm süreci*) the government has gradually shifted from this approach and increasingly adopted hard power and a hard-line political stance towards the Kurds, especially across the Turkish territory. The 25 September 2017 referendum regarding the autonomy of the Iraqi Kurdistan (Kurdish Regional Government) was vehemently opposed by Turkey as unlawful and unacceptable (Kaya *et al.*, 2017; Park *et al.*, 2017).

As a response to the independence referendum by Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey announced countermeasures such as imposing military, political, and economic sanctions not limited to blocking the transit of KRG oil going through Turkey and threatening to use force if the security of the Turkmen in Kurdistan is threatened (Reuters, 25 September 2017). Additionally, Turkey increased its diplomatic relations with both Iraq and Iran to isolate the Kurdish Regional Government (Hürriyet Daily News, 29 April 2019). However, with the geopolitics in the Middle East undergoing constant and rapid changes, the relations between the Kurdish Regional Government and Turkey have improved as Turkey has shifted focus to countering the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) within Turkey, Syria and northern Iraq. Over time, Turkey has transformed its stance towards the KRG from an antagonist to Turkish ally against the PKK. During its military offensive dubbed ‘Operation Claw,’ Turkey deployed military hardware such as drones, armoured vehicles, jets and helicopters in the northern regions of Iraq in its war against the PKK and YPG. Addressing the Kurdish question has therefore seen Turkey resort to hard power policies in its approach to the Middle East geopolitics as it attempts to safeguard existing and pursue new national interests.

Prior to 2015, Turkey enjoyed presumable a significant level of moral legitimacy across the Middle East. Its inclusive approach and good relations with actors in the region positioned Turkey as a leading mediator. However, in pursuing a reformed but characteristically confident and ambitious foreign policy in the region, Turkey has experienced weakened ties or increasingly strained relations with countries such as United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Syria, Egypt, Bahrain, and Iran. Turkey's policy in the region has also put it at loggerheads with other big powers such as the US which has responded with threats of sanctions. Specifically, the decision by Ankara to purchase the Russian manufactured S-400 missile defense system

against NATO policies and diplomatic warnings by Washington have resulted in Turkey being subjected to several sanctions including being expelled from the F-35 fighter jet development program. With regard to Russia, there have been strained diplomatic relations between Moscow and Ankara. Despite the existence of economic ties between the two traditional foes such as the S-400, the gas pipeline from Russia through Turkey to Europe, and tourism, political relations are becoming more strained.

Both the Russian and Syrian regime forces conducted offensive military campaigns against rebels and Islamists in Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama provinces in northwest Syria, despite emphatic calls from Turkey against such an attack in cognisance with a bilateral truce between Russia and Turkey to set up a demilitarised zone in Syria in September 2018. The essence of the demilitarised zone for Turkey was to hold off terrorist groups such as the PKK and YPG, extend the 'safe areas' along the Turkish border with Syria and deter another refugee influx into Turkey which has become a hotly contested domestic political agenda.

The involvement of Turkey through an assertive foreign policy in the Middle East has been because of different objectives. In Iraq and Syria, Turkey has been pursuing terrorist groups which threaten its national security and territorial integrity. In Libya, the primary objective has been to secure its maritime boundary agreement in the Mediterranean- which has also sparked tensions with the European Union. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the policy is unlike that of other regions. The position of Turkey in the area is not a government policy but rather a state foreign policy. In other words, Turkey's position with regard to the Eastern Mediterranean has not changed. It has been the same before President Erdoğan came to power, it has remained so during his presidency, and is likely to continue given the bipartisan support it has attracted as a state policy.

The independent foreign policy pursued by the Turkish government has not only cooled relations between Washington and Brussels, but it has also failed to win new allies for Turkey. Indeed, aside from Qatar, Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Libya's UN-backed Government of National Accord, it is difficult to identify other close allies. Even though Turkey's military exploits in Syria, Libya, Azerbaijan and Iraq can be hailed as having been successful, it risks becoming overstretched. Nonetheless, this article argues that even though Turkey's time in Syria may be limited given that the Assad regime backed by Russia is focused on regaining full control of the entire country, the government will continue to pursue its assertive foreign policy in the region. This is because the regional dynamics have a direct impact on Turkey's domestic politics in the sense that it exacerbates the narrative that Turkey is under a siege of an international coalition threatening its interests and therefore, strong and decisive leadership is needed to overcome the challenges.

Conclusion

The Syrian crisis, which has been at the centre of Middle East geopolitics since 2011, has yielded both positive and negative results for Turkey. Through the assertive and independent foreign policy, Turkey has been able to create a safe zone where it intends to relocate the 4 million refugees and undermine the YPG which it deems a threat to its national security. On the other hand, waning relations between Ankara and its traditional Western allies have limited Turkey's capacity to challenge any aggressive Russian influence in the region. Perhaps given the tensed geopolitical dynamics over the last few years and the advent of Covid-19 pandemic, it is imperative for Turkey to make a tactical retreat to re-evaluate and balance its hard-power and soft power capabilities; establish a low-profile attitude in the region, and focus on addressing domestic political and economic challenges. Having elections in 2023 can be said to be very timely for the government to reassess its domestic and foreign policies. The performance of opposition in the March 2019 municipal elections in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir is indeed a reflection of growing dissatisfaction with the government policy on both domestic and foreign fronts. Increasingly, the government has come under intense pressure from the deteriorating economic conditions worsened by Covid-19. Since 2017, the Turkish lira has lost almost 90 per cent of its value, and Central Bank reserves have been exhausted during the several attempts by the government to support the Turkish lira. Therefore, a strategic reassessment of Turkey's foreign policy may prove critical for the country moving forward.

However, this article is also alive to the fact that given the government's preference of 'quick wins', it is very likely that the assertive foreign policy stance will be continuously exploited in the short-term as the best tool to galvanise domestic political support for the government or better, prevent further decline of existing support. The volatility of Middle East has offered Turkey the opportunity to either achieve quick military wins or engage in confrontations- both of which serve to advance the image of a transformative government

that has elevated the country to a position of regional hegemon. One anchoring assumption of this assertive foreign policy stance by the government is that despite several verbal condemnations that may be levied against Turkey by the international community, in particular EU and US, not much can be done practically to undermine Turkey in the region. However, the EU led by France is increasingly manifesting the regions disapproval of Turkey's unilateral decisions while the election of Joe Biden signals the end of cordial Erdoğan-Trump relations and the beginning of a hardened US policy towards Turkey. Regardless of the basis and objective upon which each and every Turkish foreign policy decision has been taken towards the Middle East over the last decade, the result is that Turkey has found itself surrounded by antagonistic states (Syria, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Iraq) and very unreliable partners (Russia). With regard to these regional dynamics and the disengagement with traditional Western allies, it is plausible to argue that Turkey is increasingly facing isolation. Perhaps the ongoing strengthening of the Turkish defence industry that has seen Turkey begin to develop its own helicopters (T129 ATAK) ballistic missiles (BORA), high-tech military drones, armoured personnel carriers (Kirpi), indigenous submarines, frigates, corvettes (Ada class corvettes), and cruise missiles is perhaps an acknowledgement that its increasing isolation can only be mitigated by self-reliance on security.

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