Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?

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Turkish foreign policy has been dramatically transformed over the past two decades under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). In the first decade of AKP rule, the 'logic of interdependence' constituted the driving motive of the country's foreign policy. Turkey pursued a proactive regional integration strategy based on economic and cultural linkages, signed free trade agreements, and introduced visa-free travel with Middle Eastern countries. It acted as a neutral mediator between Israel and Syria, played an instrumental role in the resolution of the protracted Balkan conflicts, and positioned itself as an ambitious humanitarian actor drawing on soft power instruments. The AKP government also started EU accession negotiations in 2005, and membership became a real possibility despite a turbulent history of bilateral relations. All these developments led some researchers to praise the Turkish case as inspirational, lauding its 'vibrant democracy that in spite of its imperfections is seen as an example of reform in the region'.[1]

In the second decade of AKP rule, Turkey's conception of its national role changed significantly. As Holsti has stated, 'a national role conception [is not] a fixed attitudinal attribute'.[2] In Turkey, the 'logic of interdependence' and the 'mediator–integrator' role were gradually replaced by an assertive quest for 'autonomy', accompanied by military interventionism and coercive diplomacy. Turkey forsook its role of neutral arbiter in the Middle East following the Arab upheavals by becoming militarily involved in the Syrian civil war. Its relations with Israel entered a prolonged political stalemate, and bilateral relations with Egypt came to a standstill. Ironically, as of 2020, Turkey did not have ambassadors in Egypt, Israel or Syria—the three key regional states with which it cultivated strong ties in the early 2000s as part of attempts to position itself as 'a benign

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[1] Lenore Martin and Joshua W. Walker, 'Is Turkey losing its balancing act in the new Middle East?', *Foreign Policy*, 26 May 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/05/26/is-turkey-losing-its-balancing-act-in-the-new-middle-east/.

[2] K. J. Holsti, 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', *International Studies Quarterly* 14: 3, 1970, p. 254.

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regional power'.[3] At the same time, Ankara confronted its western allies in several fields, among them energy exploration in the eastern Mediterranean, entailing a head-on clash with the EU and Greece.[4] Meanwhile, institutional relations with the United States and other NATO allies deteriorated over regional security issues to an extent not previously seen in the history of the transatlantic alliance.

This article explores these dramatic shifts. We show how the logic of 'strategic autonomy' made its way into Turkish foreign policy, replacing the logic of interdependence. We argue that the paradigmatic shifts in foreign policy and the drivers of Turkey's quest for autonomous policy space can be understood as an outcome of interrelated transformations at global, regional and domestic levels.

At the global level, material power transitions involving the retreat of the West and the emergence of new power centres had profound impacts on the perceptions of governments in the global South about the possibilities inherent in the advantages of a proactive approach.[5] The 2008 financial crisis was a critical juncture; in the following years, as power was seen to be moving away from the West, the trend was further accelerated with two developments that shifted the tectonic plates of international politics. First, Donald Trump's election as American president in late 2016 opened up an unprecedented pathway to power in a post-western world as the United States withdrew from its commitment to the liberal international order;[6] and the American 'exit from hegemony' was countered by the confident rise of China under Xi Jinping.[7] China became more authoritarian at home and more assertive abroad, occupying a central place in global affairs as a status-seeking counter-hegemonic actor.[8] In its new global role, China is shaping incentive structures for other states by offering material benefits and alternative partnerships. Alliances built with like-minded leaders of non-western powers, such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, strengthened China's repositioning as an established global power, not simply a rising economy.

Second, in a global wave of authoritarian right-wing populism, leaders around the world—figures such as Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi and Viktor Orbán—consolidated their power at home, benefiting from an international environment where the political stage was monopolized by a group of 'strongmen' with certain common goals. Erdogan is a member of this family of authoritarian populist leaders who have played a critical role in shaping the foreign policy agendas

[3] Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, 'Rising powers in a changing global order: the political economy of Turkey in the age of BRICs', *Third World Quarterly* 34: 8, 2013, pp. 1409–426.

[4] Aviad Rubin and Ehud Eiran, 'Regional maritime security in the eastern Mediterranean: expectations and reality', *International Affairs* 95: 5, 2019, pp. 979–98.

[5] On shifts in the liberal international order, see G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23; Constance Duncombe and Tim Dunne, 'After liberal world order', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 25–42; Joseph S. Nye, Jr, 'The rise and fall of American hegemony from Wilson to Trump', *International Affairs* 95: 1, 2019, pp. 63–80.

[6] On Trump's presidency, see Daniel W. Drezner, 'Immature leadership: Donald Trump and the American presidency', *International Affairs* 96: 2, 2020, pp. 383–400; Nye, 'The rise and fall of American hegemony'.

[7] On the US retreat from international commitments, see Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from hegemony: the unraveling of the American global order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[8] Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Status seekers: Chinese and Russian responses to US primacy', *International Security* 34: 4, 2010, pp. 63–95; Rosemary Foot, 'Remembering the past to secure the present: Versailles legacies in a resurgent China', *International Affairs* 95: 1, 2019, pp. 143–60.

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of their respective states, often through 'liberationist' and autonomy-seeking discourses.[9] The turn to autonomy in Turkish foreign policy can be understood only by making sense of these shifts in the liberal international order.

The regional level is equally relevant. Geopolitical instability has been particularly pronounced in the Middle East and North Africa over the past decade. The Arab upheavals started promisingly in 2011 but went dramatically into reverse with the Syrian civil war. The humanitarian crisis in that country has cost around 500,000 lives and forced half the population to flee their homes.[10] In September 2019, *The Economist* reported: 'Syria's GDP is one-third of what it was before the war … [and] reconstruction will cost between $250bn and $400bn.'[11] The emerging problems associated with state failure generated a power vacuum, leading to security challenges, not only for neighbouring states, but also for Europe more broadly through the massive exodus of people, accompanied by a rising threat of terrorism and armed conflict in the context of failed states not only in Syria but also in Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

In parallel with the hegemonic transitions, the Middle East became a centre of Great Power rivalry, as the void created by the weakening of US commitment and EU indifference beyond concerns about refugee arrivals was filled by Russian military presence, with China working behind the scenes.[12] At the same time, the European periphery—especially central and eastern Europe—became an area of instability and tension, as Russia undercut the western monopoly on the use of force in the region, while the EU's transformative capacity and appeal declined.[13] Russia and China were increasingly assertive in challenging EU dominance and the United States receded into the background. These rival hierarchies in the overlapping regions of the Middle East and Europe—Turkey's immediate neighbourhoods—are crucial to understanding Ankara's recent quest to carve out a more autonomous space for action.

Domestic politics represent the third layer of an explanation of the shift in Turkish foreign policy. Erdogan has maintained his hold on power for a record 18 years, consolidating his position first as prime minister (2003–2014), then as president under a parliamentary system (2014–2018), and more recently as an all-powerful president at the head of a newly instituted presidential regime (from June 2018). During this period, reflecting global trends in democratic backsliding, Turkey took an incremental path to authoritarianism. After the failed coup attempt of July 2016, Erdogan's monopoly was extended under state of emergency regulations, and these were institutionalized in the nascent presidential regime. Not surprisingly, recent foreign policy has been dominated by Erdogan and his close

[9] On 'liberationist' discourse in emerging powers, see Eduard Jordaan, 'Fall from grace: South Africa and the changing international order', *Politics* 30: Issue Supplement 1, 2010, pp. 82–90.

[10] 'Assad's hollow victory: Syria will poison the region for years to come', *The Economist*, 5 Sept. 2019.

[11] 'Assad's hollow victory'.

[12] On Russia's role in the Middle East, see Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

[13] Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, 'Global shifts and the limits of the EU's transformative power in the European periphery: comparative perspectives from Hungary and Turkey', *Government and Opposition* 54: 2, 2019, pp. 226–53.

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associates. Therefore, to assess trends in contemporary Turkish foreign policy, we need to understand Erdogan's mindset on Turkey's status in a changing international order, and the importance he attaches to foreign policy initiatives in terms of bolstering his domestic popularity to sustain his monopoly on power.

We argue that 'strategic autonomy' has a double connotation in the Turkish context. First, it constitutes a framework within which Turkish ruling elites can *align* themselves with non-western Great Powers and *balance* the US-led hierarchical order.[14] Second, and more importantly, it serves as a legitimating foreign policy discourse by which an authoritarian populist government can mobilize its support base at home.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. The next section conceptualizes 'strategic autonomy' and assesses its relevance to the Turkish case. The following section analyses the evolution of Turkish foreign policy during the AKP era from the 'logic of interdependence' to a quest for 'autonomy'. The fourth section considers Turkey's alignment with Russia and the broader Russia–China axis. The fifth turns to Turkey's dramatic turn away from the western alliance and its new direction after 2016. The sixth examines the limits of Turkey's attempt to play one Great Power off against another. Paradoxically, the 'strategic autonomy' discourse repositioning Turkey as a 'global player' paid short-term populist dividends at home but isolated the country in the international system by creating new forms of dependence on non-western global powers.

Post-western international order and strategic autonomy: a conceptual framework

The liberal international order is undergoing a dramatic transformation. With the retreat of the West and the emergence of new power centres—including China as a major status-seeker—the world is moving towards a post-western order. The share of global GDP accounted for by the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) grew from 15.6 per cent in 1990 to 30.4 per cent in 2019, while the US share declined from 21 per cent to 16 per cent.[15] One of the consequences of waning unipolarity is the expansion of autonomous space in the foreign affairs of regional and middle powers; new-found autonomy allows these actors to reduce their dependence on the western-led hierarchical order and precludes the need for 'subtler' balancing strategies.[16]

[14] By 'ruling elites', we refer to the Turkish president and his aides. As a result of executive aggrandizement and associated de-institutionalization in foreign decision-making processes, the Turkish president has come to dominate policy-making. See Soner Çagaptay, *Erdogan's empire: Turkey and the politics of the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 2019).

[15] Based on World Bank, *World Development Indicators* database, https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators. Measured in purchasing power parity (PPP, current international US$). (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 20 May 2021.)

[16] G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth, 'Introduction: unipolarity, state behavior, and systemic consequences', *World Politics* 61: 1, 2009, p. 19. See also Seng Tan, 'Consigned to hedge: south-east Asia and America's "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 131–48; Feng Liu, 'The recalibration of Chinese assertiveness: China's response s to the Indo-Pacific challenge', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 9–28.

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This state behaviour can be conceptualized as a quest for 'strategic autonomy'. Autonomy-seeking has long been on the foreign policy agenda of states in the global South striving to reduce their dependence on hegemonic power structures. Juan Carlos Puig defines autonomy as 'the maximum capacity of choice that one [state] can have, taking into account objective real-world constraints'.[17] Pinheiro and Soares de Lima suggest that autonomy should not be conflated with sovereignty. The latter is 'a country's ability to make decisions based on its interest and needs' free of external interference within its territory; the former 'implies overcoming the condition of dependency' in a hierarchical order.[18] As Russell and Tokatlian argue, 'autonomy is employed in the sense of a *condition* (one that is either diminished or lost), whereas sovereignty is understood in terms of *international law* (that is, mutual recognition and legal equality of states)'.[19] That said, strategic autonomy does not necessarily entail decoupling from a Great Power because of excessive costs; it may be a policy impulse aimed at attracting domestic support through the exercise of more cautious 'autonomy-maximizing policies'.[20]

The concept of strategic autonomy gained popularity among emerging powers in the second decade of the twenty-first century. It drives the foreign policy of several states in Asia and Latin America, either explicitly or implicitly, and has become fashionable among European epistemic communities, even making its way into EU strategy documents.[21] Mukherjee, drawing on Isaiah Berlin's conceptualization of negative and positive liberty, suggests that strategic autonomy can have two aspects: the first is 'akin to negative liberty, or freedom from external interference'; the second is akin to positive liberty—that is, 'freedom to pursue certain goals and projects'.[22] Ultimately, the pursuit of strategic autonomy is a function of three variables: structural opportunities, willingness of political agents, and domestic material capabilities.[23]

Structural opportunities—or 'international permissibility'—open up with shifting power balances in the international order. In response to the growing material power capacity of non-western global players, the US security establishment began to portray China and Russia as revisionist actors challenging 'American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity'.[24] The reorientation of US foreign policy with the 'pivot' towards

[17] Quoted in Letícia Pinheiro and Maria Regina Soares de Lima, 'Between autonomy and dependency: the place of agency in Brazilian foreign policy', *Brazilian Political Science Review* 12: 3, 2018, p. 4.

[18] Pinheiro and Soares de Lima, 'Between autonomy and dependency', p. 6.

[19] Roberto Russell and Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, 'From antagonistic autonomy to relational autonomy: a theoretical reflection from the Southern Cone', *Latin American Politics and Society* 5: 1, 2003, p. 4.

[20] For more on 'autonomy-maximizing policies', see Arlene B. Tickner, 'Autonomy and Latin American international relations thinking', in Jorge Dominguez and Ana Covarrubias, eds, *Routledge handbook of Latin America in the world* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 79.

[21] European External Action Service, *Shared vision, common action: a stronger Europe. A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy* (Brussels, June 2016).

[22] Rohan Mukherjee, 'Chaos as opportunity: the United States and world order in India's grand strategy', *Contemporary Politics* 26: 4, 2020, p. 429.

[23] In the Latin American context, 'autonomy' is conceptualized as a function of 'international permissibility' and 'national viability'. See Tickner, 'Autonomy and Latin American international relations thinking', p. 79.

[24] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington DC, Dec. 2017), https://trump-

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Asia and retrenchment in conflict zones opened up opportunity structures for regional actors to assume a more active role in their regions, with leaders seeing US strategic restraint and the growing actorness of non-western challengers as an opportunity to improve their status in global politics. Consequently, states such as India, Brazil and Turkey have invested resources in indigenous defence technologies to reduce their dependence on global powers to handle regional security crises, and have become more flexible and transactionalist in their foreign affairs to exploit emerging opportunities by forming issue-based alliances.

Strategic autonomy entered Turkish foreign policy in the later phase of the AKP government. Scholars and policy-makers highlight the government's willingness to capitalize on the transition to a multipolar order. The growing uncertainties in the international system and the weakening of existing multilateral institutions are considered causes of Turkey's bid to play a more autonomous role in regional and international politics. As the Turkish foreign minister explained in 2019:

> Our neighboring regions and the global environment are experiencing a staggering change. The political, economic and technological transformations in the world are not superficial, but run deep and are permanent … The unipolarity that emerged after the Cold War did not last long … On global and regional levels, political and economic power struggles fuel crises and breed tension and turmoil in the system. Multilateralism is being pushed back … Due to Turkey's geopolitical location, the ability to foresee and manage surrounding vulnerabilities, fragilities and crises is of vital importance … We are entering a period where we have to come up with new ideas, new initiatives and new moves.[25]

Analysts frequently refer to strategic autonomy to explain preference formation in recent Turkish foreign policy. Explanations of Turkey's growing assertiveness in external affairs and the increasing use of military force reflect changes in the structure of the international system, scepticism about the value of western allies, and legitimate security concerns in a regional context of heightened geopolitical risks:

> After the changes in the global balance of power, the weakening of the American leadership, and the more assertive and competitive foreign policies of other global powers such as Russia and China, Turkey has decided to search for greater autonomy in its region. Furthermore, the Western states' policies, especially those of the US, have forced Turkey to follow a more independent foreign policy in order to be able to counter the increasing political instability in its regions.[26]

Balci suggests that 'throughout the post-2013 crisis with the US-led order, Erdogan has used opportunities to advance Turkey's autonomy within the US-led hierarchical order'.[27] Haugom identifies two distinct thrusts in Turkey's pursuit of autonomy: first, to 'develop a national, technologically advanced defense

whitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

[25] Mevlüt Çavuşoglu, opening speech at 11th Ambassadors' Conference, Ankara, 5 Aug. 2019, p. 6, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/BAKAN/bkon2019-eng.pdf.

[26] Muhittin Ataman, 'Editor's notes', *Insight Turkey* 21: 4, 2019, pp. 4–5.

[27] Ali Balci, 'A three-level analysis of Turkey's crisis with the US-led order', *Insight Turkey* 21: 4, 2019, p. 21.

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industry'; second, to create 'flexible alliances with various states on different issues to achieve specific foreign policy goals'.[28]

Emerging powers no longer depend exclusively on the United States for defence of their economic and security interests, and western powers' ability to impose discipline and enforce penalties for non-compliance has diminished with the waning of the unipolar US-led international order.[29] As noted above, Turkey's growing dissatisfaction with the liberal international order can be interpreted as a bargaining strategy. Whether Turkey intends to leave the US-led alliance structure altogether remains an open question. Yet we suggest that the quest for autonomy goes beyond balance of power politics, as Turkey's ambitious foreign policy activism is not matched by its material capabilities. We argue that the emphasis on strategic autonomy cannot be explained without considering the authoritarian turn in domestic politics—the employment of a *strategic autonomy discourse* as a legitimating tool at home. The openly expressed desire for strategic autonomy, based on a new confidence in the country's international status, is considered a major asset in domestic politics. The Turkish government capitalizes on this discourse to consolidate its power and build cross-class support on the basis of an assertive populist nationalism.

As the Turkish case demonstrates, the quest for strategic autonomy can create a fundamental dichotomy for states pursuing status-seeking policies. The costs of overactivism based on an inflated sense of being able to act autonomously are likely to be controlled in the short term, as the changing international order allows countries to escape penalties for aggressive foreign policy behaviour. Powerful populist–nationalist leaders benefit from their new-found ability to act independently, leveraging this to gain domestic support while diverting attention from governance crises at home. However, the short-term benefits of 'independent action' may lead to foreign policy initiatives detrimental to the country's long-term national interests. In the Turkish case, an ambitious foreign policy strategy is likely to pay populist dividends now but lead to isolation or new forms of dependence in the future.

Defining elements of Turkish foreign policy: the interplay of economy, security and identity

President Erdogan has shaped the contours of Turkish foreign policy as it has evolved over the past decade. His vision has centred on five interlocking principles underpinning the idea of 'strategic autonomy'. First, as he sees it, Turkey is an important country regionally and globally. A major actor in global politics, it is a game-changer in the region through proactive initiatives. However, over the past decade, a gap has emerged between the actual status of the country as a middle power and Erdogan's idealized conception of it as a global player. In fact, Turkey

[28] Lars Haugom, 'Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan: a change in international orientation?', *Comparative Strategy* 38: 3, 2019, pp. 206–23 at p. 212.

[29] On 'polarity' and 'liberal order', see John J. Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail: the rise and fall of the liberal international order', *International Security* 43: 4, 2019, pp. 7–50.

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has the 19th largest economy in the world and the 17th biggest population; also it lies 16th in military expenditure (2.5 per cent of GDP).[30] Yet despite the material indicators saying otherwise, Erdogan promotes Turkey as a 'global leader', capable of acting both independently and in coalition with other major states to promote its global vision. He is unequivocal on the point: 'Although Turkey is no military or economic superpower, it has emerged as a global leader by becoming part of the solution in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere.'[31]

Second, security concerns are a fundamental driver of Turkey's foreign policy, and this justifies the use of hard power amid heightened geopolitical risks. The projection of military power abroad, in conjunction with a strong indigenous defence industry, has become a central objective. In Erdogan's words:

> Turkey managed to reduce dependence on foreign technology in the defence industry from 70 per cent to 30 percent. The number of domestic firms operating in the defence industry increased from 56 to 1,500 and volume of exports in the sector increased from $248 million to more than $3 billion over the last 18 years.[32]

This investment in the indigenous defence industry was motivated by a desire to reduce the country's dependence on the West. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), between 2011–2015 and 2016–2020, Turkey reduced its arms imports by 59 per cent. US arms transfers alone fell by 81 per cent: '[Turkey] dropped from being the 3rd largest recipient of US arms exports in 2011–2015 to the 19th largest in 2016–2020.'[33]

Third, identity constitutes a principal element of the autonomy-based foreign policy outlook. The Erdogan government considers Turkey a leading country in the Islamic world, on the basis of its Sunni Muslim identity, and sees it as protecting and promoting Muslim interests globally. Erdogan suggests the Turkish army represents 'a hope for all oppressed, victims, consanguine and *ummah*'.[34] Turkey is also perceived as a leader in the global South. Along with the BRICS nations, Turkey promotes the idea of a multipolar international order and advocates the rights of the least-developed countries. It is one of the leading donors in the global South, a point frequently reiterated by Erdogan: 'Turkey's official development aid, which was 85 million dollars in 2002, increased to 8.6 billion dollars. [In terms of development aid] Turkey ranks sixth largest country in absolute volume and first if one takes into account national incomes.'[35] Some elements of Turkey's strategy contradict this humanitarian discourse, however. The AKP government has supported repressive regimes, including Nicolás Maduro's in Venezuela and

[30] World Population Review 2021 figures, https://worldpopulationreview.com; SIPRI military expenditure dataset 2018 figures, current US$, https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex; World Bank GDP figures in 2019 current US$, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD.

[31] Recep Tayyip Erdogan, 'How to fix the UN—and why we should', *Foreign Policy*, 26 Sept. 2018.

[32] Recep Tayyip Erdogan, 'Cumhurbaşkanligi hükümet kabinesi iki yillik degerlendirme toplantisi'nda yaptiklari konuşma', 21 July 2020, https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/120687/cumhurbaskanligi-hukumet-kabinesi-iki-yillik-degerlendirme-toplantisi-nda-yaptiklari-konusma (authors' translation).

[33] Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in international arms transfers, 2020*, fact sheet (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2021).

[34] 'Cumhurbaşkanı Erdogan: herkes Türkiye'nin kararliligini gördü', *TRT Haber*, 30 Aug. 2020.

[35] Erdogan, 'Cumhurbaşkanligi hükümet'.

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Omar al-Bashir's in Sudan, motivated by strong anti-western sentiments. It has also invested in hard-power capabilities, flexing its 'military muscles' beyond its borders to supplement soft power instruments. Departing from its adherence to the principle of non-intervention, Turkey established military bases in Qatar (2015) and Somalia (2017), launched military operations/forward military bases in Syria (2016) and Libya (2019), maintained its long-term presence in Iraq and Northern Cyprus, and extended strong military support to Azerbaijan through the use of Turkish drones in Nagorno-Karabakh (2020).[36]

Fourth, Russia and (albeit to a lesser extent) China are conceived of as Turkey's principal partners in a shifting global context. In the economic realm, Russia and China represent avenues for economic expansion; over time, this will lead to greater independence from the West. China and Russia are already among Turkey's top three trading partners, along with Germany. Nor is the importance of the Russia–China axis confined to the economic sphere; the two countries are new partners in providing security and promoting a more independent defence industry (of which more below). The Russia–China axis is also critically important in Turkey's new geopolitical orientation, based on highly centralized and authoritarian state–market relations with state capitalist overtones. In 2018, Turkey was invited to the BRICS conference in Johannesburg as the representative of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and Erdogan was enthusiastic about Turkey's invitation as a 'potential BRICS' member. Notably, China increasingly enjoys the upper hand in the BRICS grouping. Following the 2018 currency crisis in Turkey, in line with the desire to avoid the IMF at all costs as a symbol of western dominance, Erdogan visited China, seeking financial support in the short term and expanded economic links in the long term.[37] As in many non-democratic states, the relationship with Beijing is seen as a pathway to the consolidation of the authoritarian presidential regime in Turkey. Herein lies a paradox in recent Turkish policy. Even though Erdogan and his aides identify 'strategic autonomy' as a pillar of foreign policy, there is an underlying tendency in the swing of the pendulum towards non-democratic states, in line with the principal object of consolidating the fragile presidential regime in the domestic sphere.

Fifth—and again paradoxically, as part of the quest for strategic autonomy—bilateral ties with the West endure, in both economic and security matters. The government's understanding is that Turkey should maintain its longstanding institutional linkages through NATO membership and EU candidacy. However, the transatlantic alliance is considered interest-driven and transactional, with the West projected as the 'other' in identity terms. Thus, a foreign policy approach based on strong anti-western sentiment is a central mechanism for garnering domestic political support, and frequent 'crises' with western powers serve a useful purpose. Much

[36] According to the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS), Turkey currently deploys 3,000–5,000 troops in Qatar, 2,000 in Somalia, 5,000–10,000 in Syria, 30,000–40,000 in Northern Cyprus and approximately 2,500 in Iraq. The number of Turkish troops deployed in Libya is not available. See Sinem Adar, Hürcan Asli Aksoy, Salim Çevik, Daria Isachenko and Moritz Rau, *Visualizing Turkey's foreign policy activism* (Berlin: CATS, 16 Dec. 2020), https://www.cats-network.eu/topics/visualizing-turkeys-foreign-policy-activism/#c7897.

[37] See Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, 'The anatomy of Turkey's heterodox crisis: the interplay of domestic politics and global dynamics', *Turkish Studies*, publ. online Oct. 2020, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2020.1833723.

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as Putin uses the concept of western 'encirclement' of Russia, Erdogan portrays the 'West' as acting against Turkey's national interests and undermining its sovereignty at home—particularly following the failed coup—and abroad by supporting Kurdish groups in Syria or by taking the side of Greece in the eastern Mediterranean.

In search of strategic autonomy: partnership with Russia, China and the global South

In Erdogan's foreign policy vision, Turkey is firmly located in the global South. It is a potential BRICS member, joining like-minded powers to challenge the dominance of the West and pushing for 'a more just global order' because, in Erdogan's words, the 'world is bigger than five'.[38] Strategic autonomy essentially means acting independently of western powers, and this requires the cooperation of major non-western players, notably the Russia–China axis, an increasingly dominant authoritarian bloc within the BRICS.

The Turkey–Russia partnership has recently taken a qualitatively different turn and now constitutes the main building block of the Turkish government's autonomy-seeking policies. This relationship has long historical roots. Over several centuries, encounters were predominantly conflictual. In the Cold War, the Soviet Union emerged as a major security threat, as Turkey was a NATO member, and cooperation between the two countries, mainly in energy and construction, was limited. Yet by the mid-1980s, 'Turkey was able to develop better relations with both the Soviet Union and the western powers simultaneously, for the first time since the 1930s', and the value of bilateral trade increased from US$476 million to US$1.8 billion between 1987 and 1990.[39] The 1990s marked a further point of advance because of the two economies' complementarity: Russia was rich in energy resources, while Turkey had a comparative advantage in consumer goods and construction projects. The partnership was institutionalized by the Black Sea Economic Co-operation (BSEC) project in 1992, a Turkish initiative involving eleven countries in its region. We should note that the relationship developed within the framework of Turkey's western alliance, as BSEC was conceived not as an alternative but as a complement to the EU project.

The partnership continued to improve as part of the 'logic of interdependence' in Turkish foreign policy during the AKP era. The degree of economic interdependence expanded considerably—in trade, investment, energy, tourism and human interaction.[40] Over the AKP's first term in government, just before the 2008 financial crisis, bilateral trade increased sevenfold and the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey jumped from less than 1 million to 2.8 million.[41] However, relations remained primarily bilateral and weakly institutionalized. For

[38] Recep Tayyip Erdogan, 'Our motto "The world is bigger than five" is the biggest-ever rise against global injustice', 10 Jan. 2018, https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/89052/our-motto-the-world-is-bigger-than-five-is-the-biggest-ever-rise-against-global-injustice.

[39] William Hale, *Turkish foreign policy since 1774* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 121.

[40] See Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yilmaz, 'Turkey and Russia in a shifting global order: cooperation, conflict and asymmetric interdependence in a turbulent region', *Third World Quarterly* 37: 1, 2016, pp. 71–95.

[41] Data from Turkish Statistical Institute, https://data.tuik.gov.tr.

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instance, BSEC was sidelined as a regional multilateral cooperation organization. Erdogan and Putin drove the tempo of bilateral relations, and both avoided sensitive domestic political issues. Turkey also became more subdued and pragmatic in its interactions with the Turkic republics of central Asia. But the normative and political reference point in the early AKP era continued to be the West, as Turkish foreign policy remained anchored in the transatlantic alliance.

Turkey's relationship with Russia took a qualitatively different turn after 2011, in parallel with Ankara's pursuit of 'strategic autonomy'. Relations were now no longer confined to the logic of economic interdependence, but included issues of political identity and collective security. Domestic transformations in Turkish politics, reaching a climax with the formal transition to a presidential system in 2018, brought Turkey and Russia closer in political outlook. Also, Turkey's domestic political economy moved towards the authoritarian Russian model with state capitalist features. Both Erdogan and Putin express a strong nationalism rooted in anti-western sentiment, and show willingness to create a multipolar international order. In the past, Turkey was unhappy with certain Russian actions, including Moscow's intervention in Georgia (2008) and annexation of Crimea (2014). But these countries were geographically distant, and their fate had a limited impact on bilateral cooperation. More recently, however, Russia ceased to be a rival and became a security partner, especially after becoming involved in the Syrian civil war.[42]

The failed Turkish coup of July 2016 brought the two countries much closer, especially given the growing disappointment of the Turkish leadership in the West's failure to acknowledge Turkey's security concerns. In 2017, Turkey spent US$2.5 billion on Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles, despite serious objections from NATO members, and the two countries increasingly cooperated in the Syrian conflict.[43] Also, deepening economic and energy interdependence has involved some huge projects, including among others the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu and the Turkish Stream national gas pipeline project.[44] The volume of trade between Turkey and Russia exceeded US$27.6 billion in 2020, up from US$5.06 billion in 2002, and bilateral investment stocks increased to over US$20 billion. The number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey passed 7 million in 2019, making Russia the top sending country.[45] Ankara and Moscow seem to have agreed on an agenda of cooperation in a multipolar international order—a process institutionalized in the High-Level Cooperation Council meetings. Over the past decade, the Council has brought Putin and Erdogan together eight times; the two leaders have had an additional 101 bilateral meetings or phone calls.

[42] Seckin Kostem, 'Russian–Turkish cooperation in Syria: geopolitical alignment with limits', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, publ. online Feb. 2020, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2020.1719040.

[43] Tuvan Gumrukcu and Ece Toksabay, 'Turkey, Russia sign deal on supply of S-400 missiles', Reuters, 29 Dec. 2017.

[44] Emre Erşen and Mitat Çelikpala, 'Turkey and the changing energy geopolitics of Eurasia', *Energy Policy*, vol. 128, 2019, pp. 584–92.

[45] Data from Turkey's Ministry of Culture and Tourism, https://yigm.ktb.gov.tr/TR-249709/yillik-bultenler.html.

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Turkey has also developed closer ties with China. Since 2010, the Grand National Assembly has passed 13 China-related laws in the domains of energy, trade, infrastructure, health, logistics, technology and culture.[46] President Erdogan expressed high hopes for the future of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project at the BRI Forum in Beijing in 2017, commenting: 'Building a harmonious system in political and economic areas will herald a new era in our region based on stability and prosperity.'[47] The total value of Turkey's trade with China increased from US$1.64 billion in 2002 to US$22 billion in 2020. This expansion was accompanied by massive infrastructure and railway construction work contracted by Chinese firms in Turkey, for example the Ankara–Istanbul high-speed railway. In addition, in 2019 Turkey announced the 'Asia Anew' initiative, designed to exploit new political and economic opportunities in the non-western world within a multipolar international order. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, known as 'China's answer to the World Bank',[48] reported Turkey as the third largest borrower in 2019 and the sixth largest during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The West as the 'other': Turkey's drift away from the EU and the transatlantic alliance

The second paradigmatic manifestation of Turkey's quest for autonomy has been a shift away from the West, notably in political values and collective identity. For most of the post-1945 period, Turkey was firmly embedded in the western alliance. However, relations began to change in the second decade of AKP rule, with the West increasingly reframed as the significant 'other' in Turkish foreign policy, especially in Turkey–EU relations.

Turkey has been integrated into the EU's sphere through economic interdependence, regulatory convergence and candidacy status. Turkey signed a customs union agreement with the EU in 1996, and the EU is Turkey's largest trade and investment partner, representing 45 per cent of its foreign trade and 67 per cent of its inward foreign direct investment.[49] Nevertheless, despite this multilayered integration over time, Turkey remains distant from the EU in many ways. This distance has been accentuated in the recent period of major geopolitical rifts, reducing the allure of the EU to both peripheral 'insiders' (such as Poland and Hungary) and 'outsiders' (Turkey and Ukraine).

The EU's weak commitment has caused serious doubts among Turkish political elites. The EU's concerns centre on Turkey's size, level of economic development and collective identity. In addition, the shift to conservative democracy in key European countries and the decline of social democracy across Europe in the early

[46] Data from Grand National Assembly of Turkey.
[47] Recep Tayyip Erdogan, 'A new era will be heralded in our region based on stability and prosperity', Presidency of the Republic of Turkey website, https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/75199/a-new-era-will-be-heralded-in-our-region-based-on-stability-and-prosperity.
[48] Jane Perlez, 'US opposing China's answer to World Bank', *New York Times*, 9 Oct. 2014.
[49] Data from Turkish Statistical Institute, https://data.tuik.gov.tr.

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2000s weakened the pro-Turkey coalition in the EU.[50] Conservative right-wing parties in Europe have consistently questioned Turkey's 'Europeanness' in terms of values and culture. Under Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, the German–French duo perceived Turkey not as a natural insider sharing a common European identity, but as an important outsider—'a privileged partner' in terms of joint economic and security interests but not a potential EU member.[51] The emergence of non-western powers as alternative allies and the declining credibility of the EU in a post-western international order paved the way for paradigmatic shifts in the Turkish government's foreign policy preferences. The relationship has become transactional and interest-driven, devoid of its original normative commitment. Bilateral cooperation is likely to continue in key areas such as economics, energy and migration control, but the transformative effect of the EU on Turkish politics through credible 'conditionality' has withered. Turkey is increasingly perceived as a 'buffer state', valuable because of its ability to shield Europe from the large influx of refugees, but not a partner whose future lies in the EU.[52]

Part of the problem stems from the weakening of Turkish reform efforts on the economic and democratization fronts. Yet the EU must accept some blame for the regression in bilateral relations.[53] Fundamental concerns about 'fairness' have strengthened the position of Eurosceptics in Turkey who argue that Turkey will never be admitted because of the EU's cultural essentialist bias—even if Ankara meets all conditionality requirements. The failure of the EU to deal equitably with the Cyprus conflict, notably the decision to define Greek Cypriots as representative of the entire island despite their 2004 rejection of the Annan plan, is another geopolitical oversight. Consequently, the idea that Turkey has been treated 'unfairly' by the EU has preoccupied Turkish political elites and pushed the country further away from the EU. Tellingly, although accession talks started in 2005, only 16 negotiation chapters had been opened by 2020, making the Turkish case the longest candidacy process in the history of European integration.

A sense of humiliation and reciprocal mistrust has been used to good effect by Erdogan in a strong nationalist discourse imbued with anti-western sentiment. However, decoupling from the western alliance is likely to incur major economic losses, clearly exemplified in the EU–Turkey customs union project mentioned above. The project accelerated trade liberalization and opened up Turkish industry to external competition. It internationalized domestic conglomerates such as the automobile industry and led to expanded commercial ties. As noted above, the

[50] According to Benedetto, Hix and Mastrorocco, 'starting in the early 2000s, social democrat support collapsed almost everywhere [in Europe]. Between 2000 and 2017, most social democratic parties secured the lowest levels of support that they had had since 1918.' See Giacomo Benedetto, Simon Hix and Nicola Mastrorocco, 'The rise and fall of social democracy, 1918–2017', *American Political Science Review* 114: 3, 2020, pp. 928–39 at 931.

[51] German Chancellor Angela Merkel took office in 2005. Nicolas Sarkozy became French president in 2007.

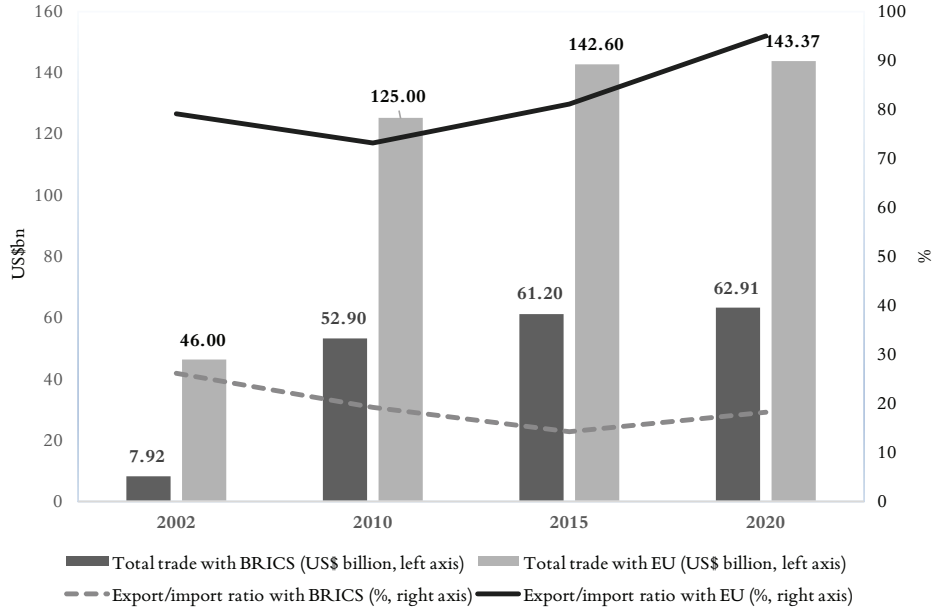
[52] E. Fuat Keyman, 'Turkish foreign policy in the post-Arab Spring era: from proactive to buffer state', *Third World Quarterly* 37: 12, 2016, pp. 2274–87.

[53] Senem Aydin-Düzgit and Alper Kaliber, 'Encounters with Europe in an era of domestic and international turmoil: is Turkey a de-Europeanising candidate country?', *South European Society and Politics* 21: 1, 2016, pp. 1–14.

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EU is the main source of capital flows to Turkey and its main trading partner on a balanced footing—far ahead of the BRICS countries (see figure 1). Turkey's total trade volume with the EU was around US$143 billion in 2020, whereas total trade volume with the BRICS hovers around US$63 billion.[54] More problematically, the trade balance is significantly uneven in favour of the BRICS, contributing to Turkey's chronic current account deficit.

Figure 1: Turkey's foreign trade with the EU and the BRICS countries



Source: Turkish Statistical Institute.

The export/import ratio in Turkey's trade with the BRICS grouping was around 18 per cent in 2020, compared to 95 per cent for trade with the EU. As the trade deficit is a chronic concern, and the BRICS countries represented most of Turkey's total trade deficit in 2020, the balanced nature of Turkey–EU trade relations remains significant. Nonetheless, the terms of the EU–Turkey partnership are openly questioned. EU membership is no longer a serious possibility, and the customs union deal is politically asymmetric. Turkey has no role in EU decision-making on trade policy but has to comply with the decisions of the European Commission, a growing source of disappointment for Turkish policy-makers. Strategic autonomy, in this context, has become a byword for the step-by-step institutionalization of a transactionalist turn in the Turkey–EU partnership. Despite the unfavourable trends, though, functional cooperation is likely to continue, given the complex interdependence between the two sides.

[54] Data from Turkish Statistical Institute, https://data.tuik.gov.tr.

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Nevertheless, reflecting Turkey's normative drift away from the western alliance, transactionalism plagues Turkey–EU relations, leaving Ankara exposed to influence from Russia and China, and sidelining the EU in geopolitical rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa.

The populist dividend at home: 'strategic autonomy' as a legitimating discourse

To sum up, over the past decade, Turkey has sought greater autonomy by aligning with non-western powers and attempting to balance the western-led hierarchical order. But a question remains: how do we account for Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy based on the projection of hard power beyond its material capabilities, a sharp contrast with the 'logic of interdependence'? In the Turkish case, we argue, strategic autonomy is also a *domestic legitimating discourse*, euphemistically vindicating the incremental transition to authoritarianism. The pursuit of an aggressive autonomy-based foreign policy has paid handsome dividends for Erdogan, boosting his domestic popularity and yielding electoral support for the presidential regime despite a political and economic governance crisis.

Discourse on strategic autonomy has been reproduced as a 'securitization' tool in three distinct elements of domestic politics. The first is Erdogan's ability to shape the foreign policy agenda in the absence of institutional checks and balances. For Erdogan, foreign policy is a natural extension of his vision of a conservative and majoritarian 'New Turkey'. In this scenario, foreign policy plays a critical role in bolstering domestic political support for the implementation of his vision; but it is built on an inflated sense of identity, according to which Turkey is a leading country in the Muslim world and a key player in the global South. His approach sharply contrasts with the traditional Turkish foreign policy paradigm, in that it more readily legitimizes military interventions beyond the country's borders if they are necessary to promote 'national interests' and 'national security' as defined by the AKP.

The second element, a functional derivative of the first, is the use of foreign policy moves to divert attention from domestic governance crises. Turkey's recent military operations in Syria, Iraq and Libya have been rationalized as motivated by security concerns, yet a close look at the timing suggests they occurred when economic and political crises broke out at home. For instance, Operation Euphrates Shield, the cross-border military operation into northern Syria, began immediately after the failed coup of July 2016. The currency crises following the transition to the presidential regime in June 2018, when the Turkish lira lost more than 30 per cent of its value, were accompanied by attempts to shift the blame on to foreigners, who, Erdogan said, had started an 'economic war' on Turkey.[55] And Operation Peace Spring, the Turkish military intervention in north-eastern Syria in 2019 targeting the area between Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad, was carried out after the government's failure in the Istanbul municipal elections.

[55] 'Erdogan: sosyal medyada ekonomik terör kişilikleri var', Bianet, 13 Aug. 2018.

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Adventurous foreign policy projects have long been used by states as a diversion from domestic political crises.[56] Yet governments in democratic regimes are constrained by check-and-balance mechanisms, free media and concerns about domestic audience costs, thus limiting foreign policy adventurism. In fact, though, this argument does not hold for Turkey—indeed, quite the opposite is true. Turkey's democratic credentials have been eroded under AKP rule, and Freedom House has ranked Turkey 'not free' since 2018.[57] Similarly, the V-Dem Institute categorizes Turkey as an 'electoral autocracy', placing it in the top three 'autocratizing countries' in the world between 2010 and 2020.[58] As Mansfield and Snyder point out,

> incipient or partial democratization can be an occasion for the rise of belligerent nationalism and war … [and] regimes that are changing toward autocracy, including states that revert to autocracy after failed experiments with democracy, are also more likely to fight wars than are states whose regime is unchanging.[59]

An aggressive foreign policy is likely to pay off in the domestic realm for leaders who capitalize on populist nationalism, as they can securitize the political agenda and gain popular support by controlling the media, framing public debate and rendering all sorts of opposition docile. In Turkey, the use of strategic autonomy as a domestic legitimating discourse has appealed to broad-based nationalist sentiments in an environment where mainstream media are controlled, and there is little space for critical discussion of foreign policy actions.

The third element of domestic politics is the use of foreign policy—and strategic autonomy discourse, for that matter—to fragment and weaken the opposition. Although Erdogan wields considerable power, his mandate is fragile. In the 2018 presidential elections, he mustered only 52 per cent of the total vote.[60] Erdogan's claim to power is based on a delicate alliance of the AKP (43 per cent) and the ultra-nationalist MHP (9 per cent). His dominance was challenged in the March 2019 municipal elections when the main opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP), in alliance with other opposition parties, took over key municipalities, including Istanbul, Ankara and Antalya. The share of AKP-led municipalities in Turkey's total economic production was 74.5 per cent before the elections; this fell to 30 per cent as the opposition parties gained considerable ground.[61] In other words, the opposition in Turkey still presents a genuine challenge to Erdogan's attempt to establish a monopoly on power. But the 'strategic autonomy' discourse on foreign policy diverts attention from political and economic problems at home and divides the opposition by stigmatizing critics of the government's foreign policy moves as actors who are not 'domestic and national'. One of the defining

[56] Alastair Smith, 'Diversionary foreign policy in democratic systems', *International Studies Quarterly* 40: 1, 1996, pp. 133–53.
[57] Freedom House, 'Democracy in crisis', *Freedom in the World Report 2018* (Washington DC, 2018), p. 7.
[58] V-Dem Institute, 'Autocratization turns viral', *Democracy Report 2021* (Gothenburg, 2021), p. 19.
[59] Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, 'Democratization and the danger of war', *International Security* 20: 1, 1995, p. 6.
[60] Data from Supreme Election Council, https://ysk.gov.tr/tr/24-haziran-2018-secimleri/77536.
[61] Koray Kaplica, 'Ekonomik payi yüksek iller CHP'ye geçiyor', *Dogruluk Payi*, 3 April 2019.

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characteristics of opposition parties in Turkey, excepting the pro-Kurdish HDP, is that they are, by and large, heavily nationalistic in their views of foreign affairs. The two main opposition parties, the CHP and the Iyi Party, are critical of Erdogan and AKP on the domestic front but not in the context of foreign policy interventions; for example, Turkey's extensive military involvement in Syria generated little criticism. The four military operations between 2016 and 2020 effectively divided the opposition by isolating the pro-Kurdish HDP, whose support was invaluable in achieving victory for the CHP's candidate in Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, in the 2019 municipal elections. To be fair, some voices in major Turkish opposition parties (notably the CHP) are critical of military operations beyond the border. Yet such criticism is muted because of the danger of being seen as unpatriotic and acting against the 'national interest' by aligning with 'foreign conspirators'.

The recent examples of Libya and the eastern Mediterranean show how autonomy has been communicated as a discursive foreign policy instrument, permitting the formation of an unlikely political coalition between the religious–conservative AKP and the ultra-nationalist secular Eurasianists. On the one hand, the government subscribed to the 'Blue Homeland Doctrine' proposed by Eurasianists. According to this, the Turkish state must be proactive and use military force—unilaterally if necessary—to protect its interests in the Mediterranean and beyond. On the other hand, Eurasianists endorsed Turkey's military operations in Libya, when Turkey took sides in the civil war in 2020 by supporting the Government of National Accord. Even though Eurasianists are closer to hard-line secular Kemalists in cultural outlook, they seem to converge with AKP in foreign policy; the unifying element appears to be a strong anti-western geopolitical identity and a willingness to use unilateral hard power in pursuit of a particular interpretation of national interests.

Beyond the nationalistic security-based rhetoric, Erdogan uses references to religious symbolism and Muslim identity in his autonomy-based liberationist discourse to further fragment the opposition and cultivate popular support. A striking example is the decision to convert the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque. Since the time of Atatürk, the Hagia Sophia has been a museum, honouring the principle that it was a holy monument with a diverse heritage appealing to different religions; this was simultaneously a sign of tolerance and a diplomatic gesture to the international community. Claiming 'Hagia Sophia [is] breaking away from its chains of captivity', Erdogan led the first prayers at a reconversion ceremony on 24 July 2020.[62] At least 350,000 worshippers attended the ceremony, held in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.[63] Changing the building back to a mosque appealed to the strong ethno-religious sentiments of conservative segments of society at a time when the combined impact of the economic and foreign policy crises seemed insurmountable. Pro-government circles framed the decision as a

[62] Bethan McKernan, 'Erdogan leads first prayers at Hagia Sophia museum reverted to mosque', *Guardian*, 24 July 2020.
[63] 'Hagia Sophia Mosque sees 1st prayers in 86 years', Anadolu Agency, 24 July 2020.

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'historic' act of 'national sovereignty and independence',[64] thus subduing opposition parties and mobilizing conservative segments of the population, but without considering the negative implications for Turkey's global standing.

In terms of maximizing populist dividends in the short term, Turkey's overambitious, often unilateralist foreign policy, based on the use of hard power and blended with a discourse on national autonomy, makes perfect sense. This kind of policy, however, will inevitably have adverse long-term consequences. Turkey's relations with the United States provide a good illustration. In spite of close personal relations between two like-minded leaders, Erdogan and Trump, bilateral ties have deteriorated to the point of no return. From the Turkish perspective, the United States is the 'other': it recently acted against Turkey's fundamental security interests by supporting the PYD-YPG (the Democratic Union Party and the Kurdish People's Protection Units) in Syria and by refusing to extradite Fethullah Gülen, seen as the key figure in the failed coup. This perspective has generated a widespread anti-American backlash in a number of segments of Turkish society. From the American perspective, Turkey is a geopolitical rival, not a strategic partner, especially as it is increasingly teaming up with Russia. The problem was exacerbated when Turkey purchased the Russian S-400 surface-to-air-missile system despite US opposition. In retaliation, the United States suspended Turkey from the global F-35 Joint Strike Fighter partnership and imposed CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions.[65] Meanwhile, bilateral ties with the EU have deteriorated to the extent that Turkey is now perceived as a typical Middle Eastern country, even a buffer state, whereas only a decade ago it was considered a potential EU member.

Turkish attempts to balance the US-led hierarchical order to carve out a more autonomous space, however, have not engendered an equal partnership with Russia, and relations between Ankara and Moscow have once more become susceptible to conflict. In Syria, Turkey and Russia are on opposite sides. As Bashar al-Assad restores his hold over Syrian territories, Turkey will have to vacate the areas it is currently controlling to placate Russia—or make further concessions to Moscow if it wants to sustain a long-term presence. This indicates a highly asymmetric relationship favouring Russia in both economic and security terms. Turkey and Russia are also on opposite sides in Libya. Thus relations between Turkey and Russia contain the seeds of conflict and fall well short of a real strategic partnership. This is especially problematic at a time when Turkey's place in NATO is being questioned.

Conclusion

This article has probed the paradigmatic transformation in Turkish foreign policy over the past two decades. During this period, Turkey's conception of its role as a mediator and integrator, drawing on the 'logic of interdependence', was gradually

[64] The headlines of all pro-government newspapers on 25 July 2020 conveyed this message.
[65] Michael R. Pompeo, 'The United States sanctions Turkey under CAATSA 231', press statement (Washington DC: State Department, 14 Dec. 2020).

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replaced with an assertive quest for 'strategic autonomy'. The latter goal includes the ability to balance global players through regional alliances, economic viability, and the use of effective diplomacy in line with material capabilities. Yet in the Turkish context, 'strategic autonomy' has been reduced to a discursive tool to legitimize authoritarian practices at home, fragment domestic opposition and accrue popular support through the rhetoric of 'national security'. This explains why the Turkish government has pursued overambitious policies, punching above its weight at the cost of external isolation and going beyond the moderate degree of autonomy compatible with its middle-power credentials.

The sustainability of this new style of foreign policy is questionable, as it requires support at home. Turkey is in the midst of a period of political and economic turbulence, in which the government has chosen to divert attention from domestic concerns and shore up its support by deliberately polarizing foreign affairs. But the approach may work only in the absence of a deep crisis—economic or otherwise.

The aggressive search for autonomy in Turkish foreign policy has led to clashes with the EU and United States, but not to Turkey's complete institutional decoupling from the western-led international order. Turkey is still in NATO and the EU customs union. Russia has also found it convenient to manage relations with Turkey and extract political and economic rents from this asymmetric partnership without forsaking its own long-term ties in other localities.

Erdogan realizes that Turkey is a strategic country in the emerging post-western order. Neither the western powers nor Russia want Turkey to move completely to the other side. This creates policy space for a significant mid-range power like Turkey to act independently, without facing the penalties it would have faced under the bipolar international system of the Cold War. Even though Turkey's relations with the West are characterized by a pattern of recurring crises, there is a sense that these conflicts are 'managed' through a set of transactionalist cooperation mechanisms while autonomy-based discourse maintains the ruling bloc in power at home—despite occasional contradictions and inconsistencies.

That being said, the election of Joe Biden as US president and the revitalization of the quest for multilateralism is likely to constrain the sphere of autonomy for Turkish foreign policy. As Biden put it, 'America is back. The transatlantic alliance is back.'[66] Personal relations with Trump allowed Erdogan to carve out some space for autonomous action on several foreign policy issues. Yet at the time of writing in the early months of 2021, Turkey is toning down its unilateral actions in the eastern Mediterranean and seeking *rapprochement* with western powers. Turkey would like to avoid the cost of sanctions imposed because of the purchase of S-400 missiles at a time of pressing economic difficulties. Hence, it has been adopting a more pragmatic approach with a renewed emphasis on diplomatic relations.[67]

[66] The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference', 19 Feb. 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/.

[67] Turkey unveiled two reform packages in early 2021—a 'human rights plan' and a 'new economic reform package'—in an attempt to convince Biden and EU leaders that it is ready to initiate political and economic reforms. These initiatives are mainly cosmetic, however.

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There is still room for Turkey to bargain, in the sense that neither the United States nor the EU wants to push too hard and send Turkey in the direction of the Russia–China axis. The new *modus operandi* between Turkey and the western powers is likely to be transactional and instrumental, with no major pressure for change in Turkey's domestic politics.

Problematically, this assertive foreign policy behaviour informs a sub-optimal equilibrium, and Turkey ends up with the worst of two worlds: a *modus operandi* of creeping crisis in relations with the West alongside growing economic and security dependence on the Russia–China axis. Although it lies beyond the scope of this article, an alternative foreign policy paradigm could be constructed around the notion of Turkey as a responsible global middle power. This would require a return to the contours of Turkish foreign policy as pursued in the early AKP era, with its emphasis on soft-power capabilities, the principle of non-interventionism, and multilateral diplomacy. By reinstating 'the logic of interdependence', Turkey could play an effective regional and global role compatible with its material capabilities. In the emerging post-western world, Turkey needs to be among the democratic group of states without necessarily being an EU member. Whether this scenario will become reality depends on Turkey's domestic political trajectory.

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