

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Turkish Foreign Policy in a Neorealist Framework: Bilateral Relations Since 2016

Eren Alper Yilmaz

Dr. Yilmaz is a researcher in the Department of Public Administration at Aydın Adnan Menderes University in Aydın, Turkey. His work mostly focuses on Turkish foreign policy, EU politics, international migration, and Middle East studies.

Abstract

In the last five years, Turkish foreign policy in the regional and international arenas has followed a neorealist approach, mostly defensive, by establishing either cooperation or conflict with its allies, based on the dynamics of its domestic politics and the structure of the international system. Due especially to the coup attempt in 2016 and rising tension in Syria sparked by the activities of illegal groups, Turkey has usually followed a security-oriented foreign policy to ensure national security and strengthen its strategic position within the framework of agreements in the military operations at its southern borders and its uncompromising principles regarding migration. The objective of this study is to analyze why Turkish foreign policy has followed a neorealist policy, by evaluating the bilateral relations with Turkey's core allies, the United States, Russia, and the European Union—ties that have survived at the highest level, even after the coup attempt and the Syrian conflict.

Since 2016, Turkey has taken significant steps to establish military and economic partnerships with great powers. Due to the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization's coup attempt in 2016, rising tensions with the Assad regime in Syria, and US efforts to support the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Ankara's decision to bolster strategic relations may be seen as part of a drive for greater autonomy—specifically, in the acquisition of a national missile-defense system.¹ However, other great powers like the United States overreacted to this policy and repeatedly attempted to intimidate Ankara with economic

¹ Gönül Tol and Nilsu Gören, "Turkey's Quest for Air Defence: Is the S-400 Deal a Pivot to Russia?" Middle East Institute Policy Focus, no. 5 (2017).

sanctions. Apart from strategic moves, Turkey has fundamentally differed from its allies in terms of its attitudes and actions, such as carrying out operations in northern Syria and supporting different interest groups in problematic regions along its border. Behind these distinctive policy moves lies the purpose of protecting the security of its own borders as well as becoming the dominant power in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean.²

Due to the significant refugee influx from Syria toward Europe starting in 2015—a problematic period, with irregular migrants passing into EU countries from Turkey—the provision of financial assistance for Syrians living in Turkey and visa facilitation for Turkish citizens were initiated between the EU and Ankara. While the Europeans accused Turkey of not fulfilling all the criteria for visa liberalization, especially its implementing strict legislation on terrorism after the 2016 coup attempt, Turkey decried the EU for not providing the financial assistance that had been promised for the Syrians. Based on all these conflicts, the European Parliament accepted a non-legally binding recommendation to temporarily freeze negotiations with Turkey as of 24 November 2016.

Because of changes in the domestic system due to the coup attempt, as well as in the regional system—such as rising tensions along the Syrian border sparked by the acts of terrorist groups and the influx of Syrian refugees heading toward Europe—Turkey has mostly followed defensive realist motives in relations with its allies. After 2016, the choices of Turkish foreign policy have diversified with the changing dynamics at systemic and regional levels as well as with evolving views on the legitimacy of the United States and Russia in international order.³ Moreover, the unreliable attitude of the EU toward Syrian refugees has been an important determinant of Turkish foreign policy in recent years.

In this context, this article analyzes Turkish foreign policy after 2016 within the framework of neorealist theory, which claims the international system's structure is a driving factor in shaping the foreign policies of states, and that states follow an interest-oriented policy to protect their security and autonomy.⁴ The study focuses on Turkey's bilateral relations with three of its most important allies on the world stage—the United States, Russia, and the European Union—in last five years, in light of Ankara's intention to protect its domestic and foreign security. Even though relations have not declined into a “hot war,” Turkey has irritated its allies by taking independent steps regarding its security interests. Within this framework, one can claim that the changes in foreign policy have resulted in a strong focus on national security, a preference for transaction-based relations, and a quest for more strategic autonomy, which form the conceptual framework of neorealist theory.⁵

² Ünal Çeviköz, “Turkey Can Become an Actor in the New Great Game in Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East,” Euronews, January 17, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/16/turkey-an-actor-in-the-new-great-game-in-eastern-mediterranean-and-the-middle-east-view>; “New Balance of Power in the Eastern Mediterranean and Turkey: Report,” SAM Ankara, 2019; G.C. Baltos, I. G. Vidakis, and J. Balodis, “Turkey's Ambitions to Emerge as a Regional Power: Example or Counter-Example for Potential Aspiring Competitors,” *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 6, no. 3 (2017): 33–46.

³ H. Tarık Oğuzlu, “Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order,” *All Azimuth* 9, no.1 (2020): 127–139.

⁴ Kenneth Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 5–41.

⁵ Lars Haugom, “Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan: A change in international orientation?” *Comparative Strategy* 38, no.3 (2019): 206.

Considering the position of Turkish foreign policy in the last few years, Turkey has been following a multilateral and proactive policy for its interests.⁶ With regard to neorealism, Turkey has pursued a proactive security policy by using military power outside its own borders when there has been a crisis threatening its national unity and security. Therefore, Turkey has made the most rational choice for its own self-interest by building a strategic and military partnership with actors like Russia (for example, purchasing the S-400 missile system), as defensive realism points to the necessity of alliances.

In short, Turkey has displayed a preference for a rational foreign policy established on its interests and opportunities in the regional arena rather than dependence on certain institutions or ruling elites fulfilling their domestic political agenda.⁷ Due to the fact that Turkey's security-oriented policies have created a tremendous impression on its three most serious allies after 2016, the article focuses on those three global actors—the United States, Russia, and the European Union. In this context, the most suitable theory for understanding the foreign-policy reflexes of Turkey may be considered neorealism, specifically defensive realism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Neorealism is a theoretical approach that explains the actions and interactions of states and other entities by analyzing the structure of the international system.⁸ In short, neorealism focuses on how the structure of the system and its variations, irrespective of human nature, affect the interacting units and the outcomes they produce.⁹ According to the neorealists, when the structure of the system is formed, it becomes a superior power independent from the actors and cannot be controlled by them. States cannot influence this structure, but the structure affects the behaviors of states.¹⁰

According to neorealist theory, power is crucial for states to ensure their security, to carry out their actions within the system, to create a maneuverable space under pressure, to maintain their sovereignty, and to achieve their interests in the international arena.¹¹ Power provides certain positions for states in the international system, and this position can shape the action of states in the regional and global arena. Neorealism posits that nation-states seek to gain power in order to ensure their own security in this anarchic system, and that physical and psychological power elements are only the means to protect national security, not the overall goal.¹² In addition, the inadequacy of international organizations to intervene in events requires states to increase their power and capacity in order to sustain their position.

⁶ Muhittin Ataman, "Turkish foreign policy during pandemic period: Report," Setav, 2020; Haugom, "Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan," 206; Birce Altıok and Salih Tosun, "Understanding foreign policy strategies during migration movements: a comparative study of Iraqi and Syrian mass refugee inflows to Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 5 (2019): 9.

⁷ Oğuzlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy," 127.

⁸ Kenneth Waltz, "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory," *Journal of International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (1990): 21-37.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Yücel Bozdağhoğlu, *Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish Identity: A Constructivist Approach* (London: Routledge Press, 2003), 14.

¹¹ Emre Çıtak, "Uluslararası İlişkilerde Gerçekçilik," in *Uluslararası İlişkiler Teorileri Temel Kavramlar*, eds. Mehmet Şahin et al. (Ankara: Kripto Press, 2014), 46.

¹² Göktürk Tüysüzöğlu, "Savunmacı Realizm ve Saldırgan Realizm Bağlamında Karadeniz Havzası'ndaki Çatışma Gerçekliğinin Değerlendirilmesi," *Avrasya Etüdleri* 44, no.2 (2013): 57-85.

Viewed from the perspective of neorealist theory, the international system has a decentralized structure and is anarchic. In this anarchic system, the aim of states is to protect their national interests. Whether these interests are power and security, capitalist profits, or welfare gains, each state aims to increase its control over those aspects of the international system that make its basic values and interests more secure.¹³ Mearsheimer, one of the promoters of neorealism, states that the connection between war and anarchy is established by the absence of an authoritarian force that maintains order. Therefore, states must rely on their own power to ensure their security. The need for security forces states to maximize their power.¹⁴ According to Mearsheimer, every state's basic goal is survival, and all other objectives are just tools to ensure survival.¹⁵

In this way, military power becomes a serious tool for states to defend themselves as well as to influence others. For this reason, neorealists give more importance to international-security issues, called "high politics," attributing secondary importance to economic relations, or "low politics." Based on this assumption, economic power is important only as long as it can be converted into military power.¹⁶ Economic power is regarded as serious when it supports military power and enables rapid formation of it if the country has no military power.¹⁷

According to defensive realism, a pillar of neorealism, states, which are the main players of the international system, want to have a military / economic / technological power that does not risk their national defenses and security.¹⁸ As defensive realism points out, the policies of states can be seen as ensuring security as well as cooperation that may be seen as a country's best option to survive in case of a sudden change in the structure of the domestic system.¹⁹ For this reason, a statesman attempts to possess the appropriate amount of power, as the ultimate target of states is security, not power.

Walt, one of the most popular representatives of defensive realism, claims that the balance of power is built through alliances in order to balance a perceived threat²⁰ and guarantee security in the approach of defensive realism. Walt describes alliances as formal or informal relations between two or more sovereign states for the purpose of security cooperation. The target of this cooperation is to increase the strength, security, and efficiency of the allied countries.²¹

While Glaser acknowledges many of the assumptions of neorealism, he argues that there are many conditions that could allow rivals to achieve their security goals thanks to cooperative policies rather than competitive moves.²² An alliance between states regarding a political, economic, or social issue, which is closely related to the balance of the international system, is also a part of defensive realism in terms of solving problems.

¹³ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 50.

¹⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5–56.

¹⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994–1995): 5–49.

¹⁶ Yücel Bozdağlıoğlu and Çınar Özen, "Liberalizmden Neoliberalizme Güç Olgusu ve Sistemik Bağımlılık," *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 1, no. 3 (2004): 59–79.

¹⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2001), 144.

¹⁸ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.

¹⁹ Charles L. Glaser, "Realists As Optimists: Cooperation As Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1996): 50–90.

²⁰ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 1990), 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Glaser, "Realists As Optimists," 51.

SECURITY-ORIENTED RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE US

Due to the worsening security environment in the region after 2016 and its negative consequences for Turkey's domestic peace and stability, Turkish decision-makers turned toward a new foreign-policy line focused on conventional security concerns. Therefore, Turkey appears to have embarked on a realist foreign-policy stance.²³ The "zero problems with neighbors" policy, which was a targeted attempt to solve Turkey's conflictual relations with its neighbors in a reasonable way, was carried out while Ahmet Davutoglu was the minister of foreign affairs. However, this policy quickly changed into the undesirable alternative of "zero neighbors without problems," which made Turkey lose alliances due to regional developments and contrasting interests between states. Conflicts with the United States also started around this time.

The Trump administration's policy of supplying military aid to PKK-affiliated Kurdish groups in northern Syria in order to defeat ISIS and to control Russian and Iranian influence in the region aggravated Turkey's security concerns in 2015.²⁴ The People's Protection Units (YPG) along Syria's northern border constituted a force of some 50,000 fighters supported by US airpower, operating in a united stretch of territory.²⁵ In May 2015, the US Defense Department began a training program for up to 5,400 fighters a year under the framework of President Barack Obama's strategy of using local troops, combined with American air power, against the Islamic State.²⁶

Furthermore, in early 2016, hundreds of US special-operations troops were sent to northern Syria to back up Kurdish and Arab forces struggling with the Islamic State. Due to the fact that the YPG was seen as a terrorist group threatening Turkey's southern borders, tensions rose between Turkey and the United States. Turkey warned the United States to withdraw its forces from Syria and give up its support for the YPG. This warning may be seen as a security-oriented response by Turkey to protect its southern borders, a tool of "high politics" within the framework of neorealist approach. The response of Turkey to the U.S. support of Kurdish groups in the following years has become more rigid, as can be seen in military intervention along its borders.

Another issue weakening relations between these parties was that Turkish-Russian cooperation regarding military supplies and equipment created a real problem for the United States. The delivery of Russian S-400 missiles to Turkey was first referenced in a meeting held in Istanbul between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The states signed a contract for the missile delivery in September 2016. Despite US threats aimed at convincing the Turkish military to step back from ordering the missile system, the S-400 air defense system arrived at Murted Air Base in 2019. Turkey's determination to go ahead with purchasing the missile-defense system despite the risk of sanctions by the United States has revitalized the debate on the long-term relations between the two sides.²⁷ The United States warned Ankara it could not have both the S-400 missiles and US F-35 fighter jets, threatening to impose economic sanctions on Turkey under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.

²³ Oğuzlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order," 136.

²⁴ A. Kasım Han and Behlül Özkan, "Turkey and United States in Syria: Allies, Frenemies, or Worse?" German Marshall Fund of the United States, September 15, 2017, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey-and-united-states-syria-allies-frenemies-or-worse>

²⁵ Aaron Stein and Michael Stephen, "The YPG: America's New Best Friend?" Al Jazeera, June 28, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/6/28/the-ypg-americas-new-best-friend/?gb=true>.

²⁶ Helene Cooper, "Few U.S.-Trained Syrians Still Fight ISIS, Senators Are Told," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/world/middleeast/isis-isil-syrians-senate-armed-services-committee.html>.

²⁷ Şaban Kardaş, "Uncertainty, Power, and Rethinking Turkish-U.S. Relations after S-400 Debacle," GMF no. 12, 2019, 1.

Turkey, however, which was establishing closer ties with Russia, refused to bow to pressure from Washington, calling it a matter of national sovereignty.²⁸ That step forced the United States to follow a rigid strategic policy against Turkey, eliminating Turkey's F-35 fighter jet program. It was announced that four F-35 aircraft, which had been previously ordered, would no longer be transferred to the Turkish state. There were security reasons for the United States, as many American defense experts claimed that the S-400 was compatible with the F-35. Therefore, Russia's clever military technology could easily obtain secret information and images shared between NATO and the US air-defense system.

For Turkey, as Glaser points out, establishing strategic collaboration with Russia and ignoring the US threats seem related to protecting security and preserving national unity based on interests—the security-oriented approach of neorealism. In particular, the dissatisfaction created by the US support to the YPG, which Ankara sees as an extension of the PKK, during the civil war in Syria, led to the purchase of the S-400s. The Russian defense system not only protects against potential air and missile attacks from abroad, but also against those inside Turkish airspace. The compression of the presidential plane by F-16 fighter jets during the 2016 coup attempt showed the weakness of defense against such aircraft and required an air-defense system against future threats. Moreover, the bombing of the Turkish Grand National Assembly made the installation of S-400s in Ankara necessary. That's why Turkey aimed to strengthen its military power, following an interest-oriented policy. An argument of neorealist theory, which asserts that states' security depends on the structure of the system,²⁹ corresponds with Turkey's proactive policy in relation to systemic threats such as another coup attempt.

Besides these reasons, Ankara also constantly sent messages to the United States, arguing that Turkey had to turn to Russia because the Americans refused to provide a much-needed missile system. However, according to Amanda Sloat, a US deputy assistant secretary of state at the time, Ankara's assertion did not exactly reflect the truth. She claimed:

This is absolutely not true. There were long discussions between the previous Obama administration and the Turkish government—including Congress—about America's intention to sell the Patriot. Turkey had certain demands on technology transfer and fees that the United States was not able to meet easily. Thus, there was no agreement on the terms of the sale and no refusal of the US government on selling the Patriots to Turkey.³⁰

Considering these claims, it is correct to say that Turkey took a rational step, based on the perception of “friend” and “enemy” shaped by its interests in international relations. For Turkey, it was not secure to wait for US Patriots and not turn toward another strategic partner such as Russia. Thus, Turkey made a logical choice within the perspective of the neorealist approach; it gained economically by purchasing the cheaper S-400 and it guaranteed national security.

After the S-400 crisis, another issue was ignited through Turkey's Operation Peace Spring against Kurdish groups in northeast Syria. In Erdogan's words, the goal was to “neutralize terror threats from the People's Protection Units against Turkey and lead to the establishment of a

²⁸ Bethan McKernan, “Russian Missile Delivery to Turkey Strains Ally's Relations with US,” *The Guardian*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/12/russian-missile-delivery-to-turkey-strains-allys-relations-with-us>.

²⁹ Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” 5.

³⁰ Mehmet Tороğlu, “Türkiye-ABD İlişkilerinin Zor Yılı”, *Amerikanın Sesi*, December 28, 2019, <https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/t%C3%BCrk-amerikan-i%C3%87li%C5%9Fkilerinin-zor-y%C4%B1%C4%B1/5223439.html>.

safe zone.”³¹ In this context, the aim was to drive terrorist groups from the borders and to create a secured area that could host three million Syrian refugees. Another reason for referring military power was explained as “the right of an individual or collective self-defense” within the framework of Article 51 of the UN Charter respecting the territorial integrity of Syria. This action plan revealed the security-oriented foreign policy of Turkey, which fits the “security priority” of neo-realist theory. On October 9, 2019, a cross-border military operation was launched by the Turkish Armed Forces and some Syrian opponents of the YPG. The struggle against the YPG became one of the main motivations behind Turkish foreign policy toward Syria and other Middle Eastern neighbors, and this policy heavily focused on security in the southeast.³²

On the first day of Operation Peace Spring, President Donald Trump threatened Turkey with rigid economic sanctions. On his Twitter account, he shared this message: “If Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits, I will totally destroy and obliterate the economy of Turkey (I’ve done it before!).” Moreover, after the meeting with congressional leaders regarding Syria, Trump wrote a heavy-handed letter to Erdogan, arguing that Turkey’s military operations toward Syria were a mistake. In the letter, which appeared to be written in undiplomatic language, Trump stated, “Don’t be a tough guy. Don’t be a fool!” adding, “I will call you later.” Such language had not been used in Turkish-US history since President Lyndon Johnson’s letter of 1964.³³

Despite all these threats and Trump’s undiplomatic language, the US administration and Turkey signed a bilateral agreement in 2019 consisting of 13 items. In a sense, the intervention of Turkish soldiers in Syria was legitimated by this agreement. According to the agreement, some serious decisions were made between the two sides:³⁴

- The Turkish army would pause Operation Peace Spring for 120 hours, and YPG forces would withdraw from the safe zone.
- Turkey and the United States would continue to fight against ISIS in northern Syria.
- The United States would withdraw sanctions on Turkey and not impose new ones.
- The safe zone” created by the agreement would be under the control of the Turkish army, which would ensure the health and safety of all residents in the region.
- Heavy weapons would be collected from the YPG, and fortifications and militant positions would be disabled.

On November 13, 2019, Erdogan visited the White House to solve regional problems. Trump and Erdogan made some serious decisions as a result of the negotiations. In the Trump-Erdogan meeting, the development of economic relations was emphasized, and the trade target of \$100 billion between the two sides was clarified. This was a significant and realistic step for the sustainability of bilateral economic relations, as the concept of “national security” has been expanded to include

³¹ Matthew Cebul, “Operation ‘Peace Spring’ and U.S. Strategy in Syria,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 11, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/10/operation-peace-spring-and-u-s-strategy-in-syria/>.

³² Haugom, “Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan,” 210.

³³ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Turkey (Washington, 1964), XVI, 107-110.

³⁴ Kerem Congar, “Türkiye ile ABD arasında varılan 13 maddelik anlaşmada neler var?” Euronews, October 18, 2019, <https://tr.euronews.com/2019/10/17/turkiye-ile-abd-arasinda-varilan-13-maddelik-anlasmada-neler-var>.

political, social, economic, and environmental issues and has recently been defined in a broader sense for neorealists.³⁵

STRATEGIC RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND RUSSIA

While Turkey and Russia are at odds with each other concerning many issues at the top level of the geopolitical agenda regarding the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean, they have simultaneously improved their capability to control crises.³⁶ Turkish-Russian relations are based on a strategic partnership as well as the negotiation of conflicts occurring outside Turkish borders in the last three years. The partnership shows that cooperation can be a country's best option and identifies the conditions under which states should prefer unilateral defensive policies rather than arms races, according to the neorealist Glaser.³⁷ In this context, the Astana and Sochi Deals that have been carried out can be seen as notable cooperation on security, as Turkey has aimed to protect its borders against terrorist groups.

One of the most serious issues between the two sides was the civil war in Syria and the territorial integrity of Turkey, owing to the terror threat around its border. In this context, the Astana talks starting in early 2017 are the most critical initiatives for permanent peace in Syria in terms of the bilateral relationship between Russia and Turkey. Since the first negotiations, many steps have been taken to ensure stability in the region. The main objective was to resolve the conflicts in a short period of time and to ensure the permanence of the ceasefire. Iran was the third guarantor country on this matter.

The talks yielded these relevant decisions:³⁸

- Confirmation of Syria's territorial integrity, independence, unity, and sovereignty as a multiethnic, multireligious, nondenominational, and democratic country
- Rejection of a military solution for the Syrian crises and strong affirmation of a political solution
- Affirmation of the permanence of the ceasefire
- Establishment of a tripartite mechanism to observe the ceasefire and prevent provocations that would undermine it
- Confirmation of the joint struggle against terrorist groups such as ISIS and Nusra

In another joint statement by Iran, Russia, and Turkey on the "International Meeting on Syria in Astana," on December 21–22, 2017, each side affirmed their belief in a ceasefire and their ongoing commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of Syria. They also committed to the defeat of ISIS and other terrorist groups, the liberation of all Syrian territory from terror, and the prevention of a transfer of international terrorists to other countries, leading to a constitution that supports the Syrian people, holding free and fair elections with the participation of all eligible Syrians within the framework of the provisions of UNSC Resolution 2254 (2015),

³⁵ Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 214–242.

³⁶ H. Tarık Oğuzlu, "We Are Now Living in World of Structural Realism," *Daily Sabah*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/we-are-now-living-in-world-of-structural-realism>.

³⁷ Glaser, "Realists As Optimists," 53.

³⁸ Rengin Arslan, "Astana Suriye görüşmeleri: Ne oldu; bundan sonra ne olacak?" *BBC*, January 25, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-38741741>.

and upholding a ceasefire between all parties.³⁹ Thus, it is not wrong to claim that building a constitution and new state structure, as well as protecting the security of Syria, was an objective of the Astana process.

One year later, on September 17, 2018, Putin and Erdogan met in Sochi and reached an agreement to create a buffer zone in Idlib. According to this deal, a demilitarized zone (DMZ) would be set up entirely within rebel-held territory. In order to stop conflicts, a disarmament zone of 15–20 km would be created. Moreover, all radical terrorist groups would be removed from the zone until a specific time. In 2019, upon Operation Peace Spring, the second Sochi deal was signed by the sides. Both Russia and Turkey confirmed their commitment to the protection of Syria's political unity and territorial integrity, as well as the protection of Turkey's national security. Contrary to the first deal, "a safe zone" 120 kilometers wide and 32 kilometers deep would be established between Tel Abyad and Rasulain on the Syrian border. Another point was that all YPG terrorist groups would withdraw from the cities of Manbij and Tell Rifaat. In other words, the YPG would have to leave the military area it had built in the north of Syria under the auspices of the United States over the past seven years.

Although Turkey and Russia have been defending peace in the Middle East, there have been some disputes between them about the future of the Syrian regime. Putin has supported Assad since the beginning of the Arab Spring, and Russia has provided him with weapons and military supplies. The head of Russia's arms-control-exports company stated that "the Syrian regime had been supplied with an advanced missile-defense system and warned enemies who were planning an attack on Syria to think carefully before doing so."⁴⁰ Furthermore, Russia has a large air base in the province of Latakia and a naval base in Tartus. The fall of the Damascus regime would mean the possible loss of Russia's only base opening on the Mediterranean and decrease its geopolitical and geostrategic assets in the area. Turkey, however, has struggled with taking down the Assad regime, attempting several different diplomatic and military strategies to preserve its own regional superiority.⁴¹

When analyzing all these steps, it is possible to reconcile Turkey's vision with neorealist theory. Ankara has focused on military tools in order to protect its borders and aimed to eliminate terrorist organizations that could be a threat to national security. Turkey actualized defensive cooperation with Russia against the YPG, in which a joint guarantee was given to provide security in case there is an attack by one of the allies.⁴²

Another strategic move was the purchase of the missile-defense system from Russia despite objections from the United States. The security threats, which peaked as a result of the 2016 coup attempt, US efforts to set up a substructure for the PKK project in northern Syria, and the situation of deep insecurity based on these domestic and foreign hazards, accelerated the process of obtaining the S-400. In particular, Turkey's air force was damaged by F-16 fighter jets during the coup bid. Nonetheless, Turkey agreed to buy S-400 missile-defense systems from Russia, although

³⁹ "Joint Statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria in Astana," Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 22, 2017, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/astanada-duzenlenen-suriye-konulu-uluslararasi-toplanti-hk-ortak-aciklama_en.en.mfa.

⁴⁰ David Kanner, "What Russia Gave Syria," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/06/21/what-russia-gave-syria/>.

⁴¹ Madjid.E. Gordji, Nader Asghari, and Manuel De La Sen, "Modeling Political and Economic Relations between Russia and Turkey: A Game Theory Approach," *International Journal of Computer Science and Network Security* 19, no. 2 (2019): 167.

⁴² Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival* 39, no. 1 (1997): 157.

they could not be integrated with NATO's technology nor achieve interoperability with its systems in 2017.⁴³ Despite rigid warnings from the United States, the first shipment of the Russian-made S-400s landed at Murted in July 2019.

The S-400 deal would mean much more than the purchase of a battle tank. The primary target of such procurement would be the control of Turkish air space and even the projection of foreign missile systems beyond Turkish borders, as well as protecting Turkey's critical national infrastructure and top-priority military, economic, and government facilities from air and missile threats.⁴⁴ The developments and changes in domestic policy can be shown as an important factor in keeping defensive realism alive.⁴⁵ At this point, we see that a sudden change in the structure of the domestic system can also rapidly reconstruct the foreign policies of states, so political leaders and other officials are able to make sudden hard decisions.

Erdogan also seems to be cooperating on security with Putin, as much to increase Turkey's bargaining power against the West as out of a desire to align itself closer to Russia.⁴⁶ This step is a further sign of Turkey's growing security rapprochement with Russia, while significantly diminishing the Turkish-Western alliance and Turkey's position in NATO.⁴⁷ The first reason for this is that Turkey's missile-defense agreement with Russia turned into a deal breaker for the US Department of Defense, which faulted the configuration of the S-400 in Turkey for providing Russia an intelligence-collection platform that could jeopardize the sophisticated stealth technology of the F-35 system.⁴⁸ Thus, the United States sees this bilateral partnership as a threat to its military security. The second reason is that the United States fears losing its reliable alliance with Turkey to Russia, as well as one of its NATO military bases. Thanks to the purchase of the S-400 missiles and the US threat of removing Turkey from the F-35 program in response, the military partnership between Ankara and the Pentagon could deteriorate in the coming years.

In this context, Turkish foreign policy has focused on a national security based on transactions and interests rather than institutions and values. Turkey has also been seeking more strategic autonomy by means of flexible alliances.⁴⁹ This way, it seeks to avoid being aligned with only one side and to take more rational steps in the international arena.

In foreign policy strides, Libya is currently one of the most critical issues triggering negative relations between Russia and Turkey. As in Syria, the parties have been positioned in opposite camps and supporting different actors in the field. Russia has also shown its power by intervening in Libya as well as Israel, France, Southern Cyprus, and Greece.

Moscow has followed a proactive approach on the Libyan issue, trying to establish serious political and economic interactions with the Gulf countries and Egypt. It has also aimed to strengthen

⁴³ Evren Balta, "From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after The Cold War," *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 16, no. 63 (2019): 81.

⁴⁴ Can Kasapoğlu, "Why Turkey Might Buy Russia's S-400 Defence System," Al Jazeera, March 24, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/03/turkey-buy-russia-s400-missile-defence-system-170323131537509.html>.

⁴⁵ Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 255-256.

⁴⁶ Haugom, "Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan," 218.

⁴⁷ Evren Balta, "From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership," 81.

⁴⁸ Gönül Tol and Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Russian Roulette," in *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, ed. Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (ISPI and Atlantic Council, 2019), 107.

⁴⁹ Haugom, "Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan," 217.

its power in the Mediterranean through Libya, in terms of negotiations with the West.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Turkey has aimed to protect its rights guaranteed by international law in the Mediterranean due to a deal signed with Libya, specifying the limitation of the maritime jurisdiction of both countries, and blocking any *fait accompli* access by other regional states. The maritime delimitation agreement also recognizes Turkey's rights in its exclusive economic zone, which extends into the southeast of the island of Crete.

In this context, while Putin supported Khalifa Haftar, who ordered his Libyan National Army to advance into Tripoli and sent mercenaries of the Wagner private-security company to carry out paramilitary activities in Libya, Erdogan deployed troops to Libya in order to support the Government of National Accord (GNA) at the beginning of 2020. These moves have created opposing policies between the two sides in the Mediterranean. Moscow perceives Ankara's action as a threat to Russia's strategy. Despite the polarization in Libya, neither Turkey nor Russia wants to be part of the conflict. Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlut Cavusoglu stated that Turkey's goal was to establish a permanent ceasefire in Libya and accelerate the political process. Libya was also one of the key factors discussed in phone conversations between Erdogan and Putin. According to Russian statements, both sides agreed that political negotiations should immediately start in Libya and include a permanent ceasefire, the result of the Berlin Conference.⁵¹ Aleksandr Dugin, a political analyst and Russian foreign-policy adviser, touched on the necessity of cooperation between Russia and Turkey on Libya to protect both their interests in the eastern Mediterranean. He also pointed to the protection of the territorial integrity of Libya, the need to end the civil war, and the necessity of fighting terrorism in the region.⁵²

Recently, troops loyal to Fayez Mustafa al-Sarraj have achieved significant success in the field. Intense air strikes by the Turkish military, armed with unmanned aerial vehicles, have been witnessed over Libya. Thanks to Turkey's support, the GNA troops have achieved significant gains. Sarraj's army also took back the country's second-most-important military facility, Al-Watiya Air Base. Owing to the increasing power of Turkey and the GNA, Russia requested an immediate ceasefire and political negotiations. Besides Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and French, German and Italian foreign ministers also made a joint call for the ceasefire in Libya.⁵³

The war in Libya is a conflict between powers vying for their interests and supporting different sides. However, reflecting the anarchic structure of the neorealist international system, there is no dominant power establishing superiority. While Turkey attributes importance to the eastern Mediterranean, it also aims to establish political superiority over the other riparian countries. As it has the longest coastline (1,870 km) in the eastern Mediterranean, it is focusing on protecting its status and justifying its authority under international law. Ankara wants to play a key role in forming exclusive economic zones, signing agreements to limit maritime jurisdictions, and obtaining a share of the region's hydrocarbon reserves. All of these actions demonstrate that, from a neorealist perspective, Turkey is maintaining its strategic interests.

⁵⁰ Mokhammad Akhiyadov, "Rusya'nın Libya Politikası," Anadolu Agency, April 6, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/gorus-rusya-nin-libya-politikasi/1794069>.

⁵¹ "Libya: Türkiye ile Rusya karşı karşıya gelir mi?" BBC, May 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-52761460>.

⁵² "Dugin: Libya'da Türk-Rus işbirliği zorunlu," Aydınlık, December 24, 2019, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/dugin-libya-da-turk-rus-isbirligi-zorunlu-turkiye-aralik-2019>.

⁵³ Declan Walsh, "In Stunning Reversal, Turkey Emerges as Libya Kingmaker," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/world/middleeast/libya-turkey-russia-hifter.html>.

PROBLEMATIC RELATIONS WITH THE EU

Negotiations between Turkey and the EU have not been conducted since 2018, due to mutual constraints and political, economic, and military factors. In June 2018, in “General Affairs Council Conclusions,” it was stated that “Turkey has been moving further away from the European Union. Turkey’s accession negotiations have therefore effectively come to a standstill and no further chapters can be opened and closed, also no further progress for the modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union is foreseen.” Even though Turkey’s EU candidate status was underlined in the preamble, the decision negatively affected Turkey-EU relations.⁵⁴

One of the most serious issues is the “refugee problem,” ongoing since the beginning of the Arab Spring. On one side, the EU emphasizes that Turkey is responsible for the routing of Syrian refugees toward Europe and should control its borders to prevent the illegal movement of migrants. On the other hand, Turkey does not want to take full responsibility and expects EU support. The EU, one of the most reputable political unions in the world, has tried to prevent refugees from migrating toward Europe en masse. The EU has built wire fences protecting land borders within the framework of its “Fortress Europe” isolation policy. It also deploys an increasing number of border guards and signs agreements with neighboring countries to keep refugees out.

In October 2015, the EU and Turkey, agreed to the “Joint Action Plan,” aimed at preventing irregular migration through Turkey toward EU borders. Turkey pledged to strengthen its efforts to prevent such movement to Europe and let the EU send irregular Syrian migrants who need no international protection back to Turkey.⁵⁵ Upon this deal, after March 2016, the EU would start to take one Syrian migrant living in Turkey in exchange for each irregular migrant sent from Greece to Turkey, called the “1-1 Formula.” In addition, the EU offered recognition of visa liberalization to Turkish citizens as of June 2016 and revitalization of the negotiation process for Turkey’s EU membership.

The EU also promised to support Syrian refugees in Turkey for a total of €6 billion, €2.7 billion of which would be transferred by the end of 2019 and €4 billion by the end of 2020. Additionally, it was stated that all funding would be transmitted to Turkey by 2025.⁵⁶ However, this fund has become a problem for the two parties as Turkey has claimed that the EU did not keep its promise and did not pay the money for the Syrian refugees on time. Erdogan exclaimed that “the EU would give 3 billion euros plus another 3 billion euros of support, but so far they have only paid 850 million euros.” He also stated, “If the EU is going to give that money, then they should do it. The Turkish nation has pride, and they can’t toy with that pride.”⁵⁷ According to Erdogan, the EU has not been honest with helping Turkey about the refugee issue due to constant delays in paying funds. Due to the EU’s unreliability, Erdogan has repeatedly threatened to open Turkey’s borders to refugees seeking to cross into Europe.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Directorate for EU Affairs, “Turkey-European Union Relations,” July 19, 2019, https://www.ab.gov.tr/turkey-eu-relations_4_en.html.

⁵⁵ Amnesty International Turkey, “Güvenli Olmayan Sığınak Report” (İstanbul, 2016), 10.

⁵⁶ “AB: Türkiye’deki Mülteciler İçin 6 Milyon Euro’nun Tamamı Tahsis Edildi,” Euronews, December 14, 2019, <https://tr.euronews.com/2019/12/10/ab-turkiye-deki-multeciler-icin-6-milyar-euronun-tamam-tahsis-edildi>.

⁵⁷ O. Dursun Özkanca, “The EU–Turkey Deal on Refugees,” in *Turkey–West Relations: The Politics of Intra-Alliance Opposition*, ed. O. Dursun Özkanca (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 90.

⁵⁸ European Parliament, *EU-Turkey Relations in Light of the Syrian Conflict and Refugee Crisis* (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020), 2.

In February 2020, due to fear of a new wave of migration after 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in terror attacks in Idlib, Turkey announced that it would open the doors for migrants to move toward Europe. After this decision, many refugees started to move toward Bulgaria and Greece via the Edirne Kapıkule border. Turkey's strategic move has made the Europeans realize that the refugee problem cannot be solved by a "fund package" alone. On the other hand, Turkey should have let some migrants leave the country in order not to destroy the integrity and demographic structure of the country.

The Arab Spring and its chaotic aftermath have seriously affected countries like Turkey that are geographically close to Syria. The migration issue has especially pushed Turkey to follow a neorealist-oriented policy to support the country's security and sovereignty. Owing to the fact that Turkey did not set up an adequate mechanism to control Syrian immigrants within the context of an "open door policy" in the beginning, Syrians have become an economic burden and security problem for the Turkish people. Officially, the influx of more than 3.5 million Syrians⁵⁹ has led to economic, security, and social chaos inside Turkey and changed the demographic structure of the country. Despite Turkey's idealist approach at the beginning, in time, policy makers have understood that the country can't cope with the millions of Syrians due to its limited economic power. Because of this, Turkey has requested economic aid called in the form of a "refugee fund" from the EU to meet the needs of the Syrians. This process has shown that the Arab Spring, which arose from the structure of the international system, has created unfavorable conditions in Turkey and has forced Turkish foreign policy to turn to foreign funds to protect its economic interests. Again, the neorealist framework best explains this.

The other issue for which the EU criticizes Turkey is its cross-border operations in northern Syria. In 2019, Turkey aimed to remove Kurdish fighters, considered terrorists by Ankara, from the border region and establish a "safe zone" in which to resettle some refugees. Ankara wanted to create a jointly controlled safe zone for months before the operation and announced it was necessary for Turkey's security. However, the operation was exposed to severe international criticism by NATO allies, as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces played a key role in the fight against ISIS.⁶⁰ The EU was one of the international actors criticizing Turkey's military intervention at the border. The president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, warned Turkey that if military action were intensified, it would not end in a "good result," arguing that a political solution was the only way to end the Syrian conflict. Additionally, he commented on the EU's attitude on intervention: "If the Turkish plan involves the creation of a so-called 'safe zone,' don't expect the European Union to pay for any of it."⁶¹ As neorealism emphasizes that states are in perpetual power struggles, a country's capacity to preserve security by gaining power is always critical.⁶² In this context, Turkey's cross-border operations, despite the EU's reactions, harmonize with neorealism's emphasis on self help.

Hydrocarbon resources, which have played a part in Turkey's eastern Mediterranean energy policy, have led to another conflict with the EU. For Turkey, it is essential to transfer energy resources to the international market independently. Therefore, it tries to obtain a slice of these

⁵⁹ Directorate General of Migration Management, "Temporary Protection," 2020, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>.

⁶⁰ Umut Aras, "Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in Northern Syria: One month On," Al Jazeera, November 8, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/turkey-operation-peace-spring-northern-syria-month-191106083300140.html>.

⁶¹ "EU Urges Turkey to Halt Syria Invasion, Will Not Pay for Safe Zone," Euractiv, October 10, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-urges-turkey-to-halt-syria-invasion-will-not-pay-for-safe-zone/>.

⁶² Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War", 27

energy resources and transmit them to the European market. Thus, hydrocarbon resources explored within Turkey's maritime jurisdiction substantially provide the opportunity to support its economy en route to becoming a regional power.

The eastern Mediterranean is also important for Turkey in terms of the sovereignty of Northern Cyprus, exclusive economic zones and the continental shelf, as well as the rich energy resources of the region. This is defensive realism, increasing an appropriate amount of power due to the priority of security-oriented interests, specifically in relation to the Northern Cyprus issue. Structural dynamics push states to become stronger. Although these dynamics vary from region to region and country to country, they include geographic proximity, threatening approaches, "access to strategic raw materials," serious international economic pressures, and mutual military balance.⁶³

As Turkey aims to protect the sovereignty of Northern Cyprus in the international arena, based on guarantorship rights determined by the London and Zurich Agreements of 1960, Ankara objects to decisions by the Greek Cypriot Administration (GCA) that exclude Northern Cyprus pursuant to political alliances with other countries on the use of hydrocarbon reserves. Moreover, Turkey has dispatched the research vessel Oruç Reis to the eastern Mediterranean after a new NAVTEX, a maritime communications system that allows ships to inform other vessels about their presence in an area as well as other information. It shows that Turkey has developed balancing behavior and policies according to the threat it perceives from Greece and the GCA, as Walt expects in his theory of defensive realism.

In 2019, during negotiations among the EU ministers in Luxembourg, there was concern about Turkey's drilling for hydrocarbons around the "Cyprus economic zone" and a request was made for Turkey to give up that drilling as soon as possible, in keeping with international law.⁶⁴ In the same year, EU foreign ministers responded to Turkey's drilling operations by agreeing on a legal framework, including sanctions such as the freezing of property and travel bans against natural-gas explorers.

In 2020, a joint statement by the EU foreign ministers indicated they would put pressure on Turkey. They accused Ankara of raising the tensions between the sides and repeated their claims that Turkey's steps in the region violated the sovereign rights of the Greek Cypriot administration. Energy and Natural Resources Minister Fatih Donmez, referring to the memorandum signed with Libya, stated that the process for drilling in the Mediterranean had already begun and that the Turkish Petroleum Corporation had applied to the Tripoli-based GNA for permission to drill in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶⁵ This situation has created a broader geopolitical rivalry in the eastern Mediterranean. Due to the anarchic structure of the international system, security concerns are at a heightened level. While the EU has supported the policies of Egypt and its General Authority for Supply Commodities, as well as Greece, Turkey and Libya have taken the same side.

CONCLUSION

In the last few years, Turkey's relations with its allies have broken down, due mainly to the refugee crisis, the purchase of the Russian defense system, and cross-border operations in northern Syria.

⁶³ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-172.

⁶⁴ "AB'de Türkiye'nin sondaj faaliyetine tepki hazırlığı," DW, June 18, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/tr/abde-t%C3%BCrkiyenin-sondaj-faaliyetine-tepki-haz%C4%B1rl%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1/a-49252966>.

⁶⁵ Turkish Petroleum Corporation requests permission to explore in Libya," Libyan Address, May 31, 2020, <https://www.addresslibya.co/en/archives/56435>.

While domestic events like the 2016 coup attempt have shaped the path of foreign policy, conflicts along the borders threatening national unity and sovereignty, as well as the negative attitudes of the West toward Turkey have led to a series of rational foreign-policy moves.

Since 2016, Turkey has pursued a proactive security policy focusing on using military power to protect its borders and strengthen its military capacity vis-à-vis threats inside and outside, even if it runs the risk of destroying its relationships with allies.

Turkish foreign policy has followed the neorealist framework in relations with its alliances over the last few years, based upon the systemic structure domestically and externally. It is not wrong to claim that the decisions and policies show Turkey's effort to become an effective regional power as well as to protect its own security, political, and social interests. Hence, Turkey has played a more efficient role using its hard power when it has been necessary in regional issues such as the Syrian and Libyan crises, as well as using its voice on international matters affecting the country, such as the refugee crisis. The implementation of neorealist Turkish foreign policy in the last five years indicates that the perception of "friend" and "enemy" in international politics is shaped pursuant to a state's interests.

How to cite this article: Yilmaz EA. Turkish foreign policy in a neorealist framework: bilateral relations since 2016. *Middle East Policy*. 2021;1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12577>