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To cite this article: Lars Haugom (2019) Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan: A change in international orientation?, Comparative Strategy, 38:3, 206-223, DOI: 10.1080/01495933.2019.1606662

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2019.1606662

Published online: 17 Jun 2019.

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Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan: A change in international orientation?

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ABSTRACT
There have been significant changes in Turkish foreign policy under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in particular since the 2016 military coup attempt. The changes have resulted in a strong focus on national security, an assertive style in policy implementation, a preference for transaction-based relations, and a quest for more strategic autonomy. Two main arguments are made: First, these features of policy represent both change and continuity when compared with earlier periods in Turkish foreign policy. The novelty under Erdogan is primarily in how the features are combined. Second, the changes do not represent a shift in Turkey’s overall international orientation.

Since Reccep Tayyip Erdogan became President of Turkey in 2014, and in particular since the July 15, 2016 military coup attempt, Turkish foreign policy appears to have been in a state of change. There are at least three apparent features in this picture. There has been a marked rapprochement between Turkey and Eastern powers, first and foremost Russia. At the same time, Turkey and many of its Western allies have moved apart, resulting in recurring diplomatic conflicts and crises. Deteriorating relations with the United States and leading European nations such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands stand out in this context. Finally, Ankara has taken a much more independent and proactive role in its own Middle Eastern neighborhood, including the deployment of military forces to Syria and Iraq.

These developments have heightened an already ongoing debate on whether a more fundamental change is taking place in Turkish foreign policy. This article discusses how and why foreign policy has changed under President Erdogan, and if the changes also herald a shift in Turkey’s overall international orientation—i.e., away from the transatlantic community.

Foreign policy and foreign policy change

Foreign policy can be understood as government programs containing the intentions, goals, strategies and instruments of national decision-makers responding to the current and future international environment of the state. Since this environment is outside the jurisdiction of national decision-makers, the goals pursued and the means employed in foreign policy will quite naturally differ from those found in domestic policy—even if the two policy areas affect each other and partly overlap.

Foreign policy change is defined in different ways in the literature. Some scholars do not define specifically what they mean by the term, while others present elaborate definitions and typologies. Kalevi Holsti, for example, reserves the notion of change to a “restructuring,” or a
dramatic wholesale alteration of a nations’ pattern of external relations. For the purpose of this article, the typology of foreign policy change suggested by Charles K. Hermann seems more applicable.

Hermann’s typology will be used to discuss the extent of change in Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan when compared with earlier periods in the country’s history, and whether this development also implies international orientation change—that is, a total restructuring of Turkey’s pattern of its foreign relations. Hermann distinguishes between four levels of foreign policy change. The highest level would correspond to Holsti’s notion of restructuring.

1. Adjustment change: Changes in efforts and/or scope of foreign policy. In the Turkish case, this is most apparent in the strong focus on national security under Erdogan.

2. Program change: Changes in methods and means by which foreign policy is pursued. For Turkey, this would include the use of more assertive means and a preference for transaction-based relations.

3. Problem/goal change: Replacement of the purpose of policy. Under Erdogan, the purpose of foreign policy has become more strategic autonomy, pursued by means of flexible alliances with various states on different issues to achieve specific foreign-policy objectives.

4. International orientation change: The redirection of a state’s entire orientation toward world affairs. It is debatable if such a change is taking place in Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan. There have been significant alterations, but whether these alterations can be called dramatic and wholesale is questionable. In that case, we would, for example, also expect to see a Turkish disengagement from the West (i.e., NATO) in favor of realignment with non-Western powers, or nonalignment.

Regarding explanations of foreign policy change, scholars point to various factors that should be included in the analysis. In the field of foreign policy analysis (FPA), a number of different factors are taken into account, ranging from traits of individual decision-makers and group decision-making, to national culture, domestic politics, and the position of a country in the international system of states.

Foreign policy is here regarded not only as the result of power shifts in the international system of states, but also from changes in their regional system and domestic environment. At the intersection of these environments, we find a state’s foreign policy executive (FPE)—a collective term for the decision makers who decide on foreign policy based on their perceptions of threats and opportunities—externally and internally. External factors naturally loom large for these decision makers, but their own position and future in the domestic political system also carry weight. In other words, foreign policy can be made for domestic reasons, just as domestic policy can be made for foreign policy reasons.

Since intrastate competition is important for foreign policy, societal elites and interest groups have influence on foreign policy decision-making. According to Norrin M. Ripsman, the amount of influence interest groups can have on foreign policy may be decided by how much structural autonomy decision makers enjoy within the system. Democratically elected leaders with a strong majority in the national assembly may therefore have more discretionary power in foreign policy-making than a dictator propped up by certain domestic elites and interest groups with their own parochial foreign policy interests.

This perspective on how foreign policy is made also seems relevant for understanding the changes in foreign policy under Erdogan. Over the last decade, there have been major changes in Turkey’s regional and domestic environment, the composition of the FPE, and which interest groups may have influence on foreign policy decision-making.
Focus, scope and sources in the article

The focus of this article is Turkish foreign policy in the period beginning when Erdogan was elected president of Turkey for the first time in 2014. Such a choice of starting point will always be somewhat arbitrary. The changes in foreign policy outlined in the introduction to this article have taken place over time and were discernible before 2014. Moreover, it would be a gross simplification to link all foreign policy change to the person of President Erdogan. However, there is little doubt that the changes discussed in this article have become more accentuated after Erdogan became president in 2014, and in particular after the failed military coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016. Hence, it makes sense to mainly focus on events and developments that have taken place within this time frame.

The article is based on two main types of sources: The first consists of semi-structured expert interviews in Turkey and Brussels. Interviewees in Turkey have been deliberately selected to reflect a spectrum of views ranging from Atlanticists to right-wing nationalists and Eurasianists. Eurasianism in Turkey is understood as the advocacy of closer relations with Russia, Iran, and other states in Turkey’s Eastern neighborhood, at the expense of relations with the United States and Europe.

In the current political climate in Turkey, sources within the state apparatus and with access to the political leadership are generally not willing to give interviews. To compensate for this lack of government sources, my interviewees include former AKP politicians and researchers in institutions affiliated with the government. All the interviewees have been anonymized in order to protect them from possible dismissal, prosecution, or entry ban into Turkey.7

The second type is written sources, both media reports and previous research into the subject. One limitation here is government media control in Turkey, which makes it difficult to find critical views on foreign and security policy in mainstream media.8 Journalists, political analysts, and researchers outside Turkey are freer to write on these matters than their colleagues inside the country. The article is therefore based on a combination of written sources from inside and outside Turkey.

Two significant limitations regarding the sources used for this article become clear. The first is a lack of official documents that could shed light on the goals, priorities, and strategies of the Turkish government in foreign policy. A time series of such documents would have been highly useful in determining the nature and extent of foreign policy change. To compensate for this lack of official documents, I have instead used official statements made by the Turkish government and government officials in various media, in combination with expert interviews.

The other limitation is the anonymization of the respondents. I compensate for this limitation by indicating as much as possible about their professional capacity and position without revealing their actual identity.

Turkish foreign policy: Between greatness and vulnerability

Turkish foreign policy is influenced by contradicting perceptions of national greatness and vulnerability.9 On the one hand, Turkey is heir to the Ottoman Empire, which at the height of its power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries spanned large parts of southeastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and North Africa. This imperial legacy has in recent decades been an impetus to visions of Turkey as a modern great power and a leading state in its own regional neighborhood. However, Turkey also carries the bitter historical memories of imperial defeat at the hands of the European powers and Russia in World War I and the humiliating treaty made at Sevres in 1920 that stipulated the slicing of Anatolia into many parts and subjection to foreign control. Even though the Sevres Treaty was never implemented, and the War of Independence (1920–23) permitted the establishment of a Turkish Republic covering the whole of Anatolia and
parts of Thrace on the European continent, a so-called “Sevres-syndrome” continued to mark strategic culture in Turkey. National threat perceptions in Turkey have therefore often centered on the country’s unique geostrategic position and its vulnerability to great-power interests. By extension, national security has for long periods dominated matters of state and has remained a primary concern in Turkish foreign policy.

İomer Taspinar, professor and Turkey expert at the National War College in the United States, has suggested a highly useful overview of paradigmatic shifts in Turkish foreign policy by identifying three strategic visions for Turkey and its place in the international order: “Kemalism,” “Neo-Ottomanism,” and “Turkish Gaullism.” These strategic visions are associated with the foreign policy of different periods in the history of the Turkish Republic. Taspinar’s division of Turkish foreign policy into three distinct historical periods since the Second World War is first and foremost a useful analytical tool for mapping major shifts in policy.

The first vision coincides with the foreign and security policy outlook of the old Republican elite in Turkey, hence the label Kemalist. This vision characterized Turkish foreign policy in the long historical period between 1923 and the end of the Cold War. However, Kemalism resulted in different foreign policy strategies at different times. Turkey was nonaligned and led an isolationist foreign policy until the Second World War, remained neutral during the war years, and then became part of the transatlantic community through membership in NATO from 1952. Moreover, Ankara’s Western-oriented foreign policy in the Cold War years was often shaped and implemented by governments that were not Kemalist in their ideology. The conservative Menderes governments during the 1950s, which oversaw Turkey’s entrance into NATO and committed Turkish troops to the Korean War, is a case in point.

Ankara’s foreign policy vision during the Cold War years was based on the perception of Turkey’s vulnerability to Soviet expansionism and regional instability, and primarily focused on preserving national independence and the secular character of the republic. External relations were mainly characterized by a defensive stance and modest ambitions. Turkey largely aligned its foreign policy with the United States and Western European nations, and political, economic and cultural relations were primarily with the West, in line with national ambitions for economic development, modernization, and Westernization. Relations with eastern neighbors, on the other hand, were minimal.

The end of the Cold War altered Turkey’s geopolitical situation significantly. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact changed Turkey’s strategic position from a flank country in NATO to a crossroads between several regions and many newly independent states. These upheavals coincided with the transition from a state-directed to a market economy in Turkey, which in time brought forth a new class of business entrepreneurs eager for export opportunities. Within the span of a few decades, Turkey developed into a trading state with one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and this development largely changed the basis of Turkish foreign policy thinking from security to economy. Rather than a threat to national security, Turkey’s geostrategic position between the Balkans, Caucasus, Central-Asia, and the Middle East was now seen as creating opportunities for the country in terms of diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchange.

Turkey’s potential as an economic and political powerhouse in its own neighborhood and in neighboring regions was at the heart of a new strategic vision, which first emerged under the governments led by Turgut Özal in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and then became prominent in the foreign policy of the conservative-religious Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments from 2002. Taspinar labels this vision Neo-Ottomanism. According to Hakan Yavuz, Neo-Ottomanism is about constructing a new national identity and translating it into foreign policy by using historical, cultural, and religious ties to former Ottoman territories. What this concept captures well is the reconnection in post–Cold War Turkey with countries that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire, both in national identity and in foreign policy. What the concept misses,
however, is that Turkish foreign relations expanded to regions and continents far beyond the old Ottoman domains, and that this expansion was largely driven by Turkey’s rapid economic development and emergence as a mid-sized power in the world economy.

The new strategic vision was based on the perception of Turkey’s potential as a regional great power and (later) on its opportunity to become a middle-range power in the international system. As a pivotal state, Turkey could and should play a very active diplomatic, political, and economic role in a wide region of which it is at the “center.”15 Under the first AKP government (2002–2007), when Turkey was adapting to the European Union in preparation for future membership, relations with Europe and Turkey’s role as a bridge between east and west was emphasized. This emphasis changed during the AKPs second period in power (2007–2014), after the EU-membership process ran aground. Under the then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, foreign policy was shifted toward improving relations with Turkey’s southern and eastern neighbors with ambitions to play a regional leadership role. Davutoğlu promoted an activist foreign policy pursued by soft-power means that was aimed at giving Turkey so-called strategic depth in neighboring regions.16 By means of diplomacy, economic relations, and cultural exchange, Turkey would gain influence and become a leading state, facilitator and broker in regional affairs. During the same period, Ankara also expanded its foreign relations to a large number of countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, primarily with an eye to increase trade and open new markets for Turkey’s burgeoning business sector. This shift toward neighboring regions and other continents did not mean that Turkey would downgrade relations with its traditional partners in the West, however. On the contrary, strategic depth was seen as a means to secure the continued relevance of Turkey for its Western partners.

According to Taspinar, Neo-Ottomanism has now been superseded by a third strategic vision that has become prominent under President Erdogan: Turkish Gaullism. By using this label, he draws parallels to French foreign policy in the 1960s under President Charles de Gaulle. Taspinar argues that Turkish foreign policy increasingly combines elements from both Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism in a new strategic vision where perceptions of Turkey’s greatness and role as regional power are wedded to a strong emphasis on threats to national independence and national interests.17 Turkey’s foreign policy outlook has, in other words, become more overtly nationalistic, independent, self-confident, and defiant.

**Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan**

The overriding focus of foreign policy under Erdogan has become national security. This feature would be an adjustment change because it concerns the scope and effort of foreign policy. Ankara has directed much effort toward the interconnected goals of containing regional unrest and combatting the enemies of the Turkish state at home and abroad.18 The latter category includes a number of organizations defined as terrorist groups by the Turkish government, including the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), the Gülen movement (FETO), the Islamic State (IS), and the People’s Revolutionary Party/Front (DHKP/C).19 The struggle against the PKK and its affiliates has been one of the main motivations behind Turkey’s policy toward Syria and other Middle Eastern neighbors, and Turkish foreign policy has consequently become heavily focused on security in the southeast.20 Moreover, counterterrorism has become a significant issue in Turkey’s bilateral relations, in particular with countries harboring Turkish citizens wanted by the Turkish government on terrorism charges.

**Assertive style, transactional basis**

Furthermore, foreign policy under Erdogan has been distinctly assertive, reflected both in diplomatic style and in Turkey’s willingness to project military power beyond national borders.21 In
addition, there seems to be a preference for transactional and interest-based relations with other states. Both these features would represent a program change in Turkish foreign policy.

Regarding assertiveness in diplomacy, Ankara has employed a very sharp tone in diplomatic disputes with other countries—most notably toward some of its Western allies, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands and France. In some cases, the tone from Turkey can best be described not as defiant, but threatening.22

The Turkish government has also assumed a highly assertive attitude in rhetoric toward NATO. For example, during the NATO Exercise Trident Javelin in Stavanger, Norway, in November 2017, Turkey withdrew its officers from the exercise after an incident where President Erdogan and the country’s founding father Kemal Atatürk allegedly were portrayed as NATO’s enemies. This incident drew loud public criticism from Erdogan and other government members, and was accompanied by persistent demands for apologies and hints that Turkey might reconsider its membership altogether.23

In regional affairs, Turkey has demonstrated another type of assertiveness by means of military power.24 The policy is perhaps best expressed in the country’s new security concept, dubbed the Erdogan doctrine by Turkish media.25 According to the new concept, Turkey shall pursue a proactive security policy with the use of preemptive military power outside its own borders—and when necessary act unilaterally, even if this means disregarding alliance partners. Major military operations in Syria and Iraq from autumn 2016 are probably the best examples of this concept put into in practice. However, Ankara has also projected military power further afield and established military bases in Qatar and Somalia with proposals to do the same in the Sudan and Djibouti.26 Even if such bases were planned before Erdogan was elected president in 2014, they have become a more pronounced element in Turkish foreign policy since then. The bases are supposed to contribute to the safeguarding of Turkish interests in the Middle East and on the African continent. Qatar is Turkey’s closest ally in the Gulf region, while Somalia and Sudan are the main gateways for Turkish economic investments in Africa.27

Ankara also displays an increasing preference for a transactional foreign policy—that is, a foreign policy decided more by coinciding interests and opportunities than affiliation to certain institutions or communities of states. One example of this approach is Turkey’s refugee agreement with the European Union from 2015. From the Turkish side, this was perceived as a pragmatic agreement solely based on calculations of interests: Europe wanted to stem the tide of migrants, Turkey wanted cash and other benefits—including visa free travel for Turkish citizens within the Schengen area and resumption of Turkey’s EU-accession process.28

The deal stands in contrast to Turkey’s previous accession negotiations with the EU, in which progress has been linked to Ankara’s compliance with the union’s criteria for membership. The refugee agreement could signal a willingness by Brussels to put EU-Turkey relations on a more transactional basis. French President Emmanuel Macron alluded to the possibility of such a “partnership” when he met President Erdogan in January 2018.29 However, it is difficult for the EU to change the basis of its relations with Turkey as long as the process for Turkish EU-membership is formally ongoing and Ankara is signaling a continued determination to become an EU member.30

Another and less debated example of transactional relations is Turkey’s so-called “strategic relationship” with the United Kingdom, which has emerged in the wake of the Brexit referendum in 2016. The relationship is mainly limited to bilateral cooperation in defense, security, and trade—areas that are mutually beneficial for the two countries.31

Reciprocity has become a central principle in the implementation of Turkey’s transactional foreign policy.32 One much-debated example can be found in Ankara’s approach to NATO, where Turkey since 2017 systematically has blocked Austria’s participation in NATO’s partnership program and the country’s path toward full membership in the alliance. Turkey has made no secret
of the fact that its vetoing of Austria is diplomatic retaliation for Austrian resistance to Turkish EU membership.33

Another, almost caricatured, example of the reciprocity principle in use was Erdogan’s proposal in 2017 that the United States extradite Fetullah Gülen, the man widely believed in Turkey to be the mastermind behind the July 15, 2016, coup attempt, in return for Andrew Brunson, an American pastor who was kept in detention in Turkey for more than two years on charges of links to terrorist organizations.34 Similar proposals of swaps were made to the German government regarding German nationals jailed in Turkey.35

A quest for greater strategic autonomy

Turkey is also seeking greater strategic autonomy in its relations to the outside world.36 There are at least two important aspects of this quest.

The first aspect is Turkey’s efforts to develop a national, technologically advanced defense industry. The overall goal is to become self-sufficient in arms procurement, achieved by means of cooperative ventures with foreign producers that include technology transfer to Turkey and sustained by export of defense equipment to other countries. Turkey’s participation in the EUROSAM project with France and Italy to develop long-range missiles for the Turkish Air Force is one example of such cooperative ventures.37 Another is the planned participation of British Aerospace in developing and building the TF-X, Turkey’s first indigenous fighter jet.38

Ankara’s decision to buy the Russian S-400 system must also be viewed as part of Turkish ambitions for greater strategic autonomy, more specifically in the acquisition of a national missile defense system.39 The Russian alternative was preferred much out of dissatisfaction with rival offers from Western producers that either fell short of Turkish requirements or did not include any technology transfer to Turkey. However, despite Turkish efforts to the contrary, the S-400 deal also ended up without any inclusion of technology transfer.40 The choice of the S-400s has therefore become more of a political pawn in Turkey’s turbulent relations with Western allies than a step toward self-sufficiency in defense technology.

The other major aspect of strategic autonomy is that Turkey is seeking flexible alliances with various states on different issues to achieve specific foreign policy goals.41 The alliance with Russia and Iran on Syria through the Astana process is the most obvious example. By becoming their strategic partner, Turkey has been able to pursue its own national agenda in the northwestern part of the country. Ankara’s goals in this context can be summed up as displacing terrorist forces (mainly those belonging to the Kurdish People’s Protection Units, YPG), resettling Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey, and securing a stake for Turkish interests in a future Syria. Turkey could not have achieved the same goals by means of its established alliance with the United States and other Western powers, which has neither the same influence in Syria as Russia and Iran, nor any interest in displacing Kurdish militias from the north. On the contrary, the YPG has been the United States’ main local military partner in operations against the Islamic State in Syria.

Turkey has had a similar alliance with Iran and the Iraqi government in Baghdad. These three actors have mutual interests in combatting the PKK and its Iranian sister organization, PJAK, and in thwarting the ambitions of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) for independent statehood. However, as in the case of Russia, cooperation between Turkey and Iran is based on limited overlapping interests in combatting terrorism in their shared neighborhood and balancing against the regional alliance between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. This latter alliance is directed both against Iran and Qatar, Turkey’s main ally in the Persian Gulf area. On most other regional issues, Ankara and Tehran have diverging security interests. Turkey is highly concerned about growing Iranian influence in the Middle East, not least in Syria and Iraq, and about the prospect of a future Iran with nuclear weapons.
What is driving Turkish foreign policy change?

The second question raised in this article is why the features outlined about have become prominent in Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan. The source material does not allow for drawing any strong causal inferences from explanatory factors to individual types of change, or assigning weight to the different factors. What follows is rather an attempt to contextualize the features by linking them to four significant developments—two external and two internal—over the last decade: deterioration in Turkey’s regional and domestic security environment, concentration of executive power in the presidency, and changes in the government’s constituency.

This type of analysis raises the perennial issue of agency and structure in explanations of social phenomena. Addressing this issue, Walter Carlsnaes has suggested that the policies of states can only fully be explained with reference to “a dynamic process in which both agency and structure causally condition each other over time.” This is also the approach taken in this article.

Regional and domestic security

Turkey’s international and domestic security environment has changed considerably over the last decade. The Arab Spring and its aftermath created a much more unstable situation in Turkey’s Middle Eastern neighborhood, in particular in Syria where initial political protests in 2011 escalated into a long, drawn-out civil war. Turkey increasingly came to feel the repercussions of this war in the form of large refugee flows, military clashes in the border area, and transit of Syrian and foreign fighters. The war also strengthened the position of Kurdish groups in Northern Syria that were affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), raising the specter for Ankara of a hostile Kurdish self-rule area just across the border to its south.

The Arab Spring revealed the limits of Turkish foreign policy when dealing with a Middle East characterized by instability rather than stability. Initially, Ankara saw the Arab Spring as an opportunity to take a leadership role in the ongoing transformation of the region, both by promoting the AKP as a political-party model for the Arab Middle East, and by supporting organizations that were in opposition to the old regimes, particularly those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood’s moderate form of Islamism. This approach brought Turkey especially close to Egypt during the short-lived presidency of Muhammed Morsi, and to Qatar, which played a similar proactive role as Turkey in promoting political change and supporting the moderate Islamist opposition. However, Ankara’s ambition to promote political transformations in the Middle East was not universally welcomed in the Arab world. With the backlash that followed the uprisings, Turkey found itself more and more diplomatically isolated in the region.

In 2013, Turkey also got its own Arab Spring in the so-called Gezi Park protests. Even if these protests never represented a serious threat to the government, they alerted Erdogan and the AKP to a sizeable and very vocal opposition willing to act outside the official channels for political participation. The Gezi protests also coincided with the breakdown in relations between Erdogan and the Gülen movement, which triggered a bitter internal feud in the state apparatus and governing circles between Erdogan loyalists and Gülenists.

Internal political violence was also on the rise. In 2015, the ceasefire with the PKK broke down, leading to a number of violent events in Turkey’s southeast. In addition, between 2015 and 2016, Turkey experienced a series of terrorist attacks, several of them directed against targets in the major cities of Ankara and Istanbul. On top this came the bloody July 15, 2016, military coup attempt, widely believed in Turkey to have been staged by members of the Gülen movement to unseat President Erdogan and the AKP government.

Deterioration of the security situation in general, and the July 15 military coup attempt in particular, set the Turkish government in “survival mode” and pushed national security concerns to the top of Ankara’s political agenda.
Disenchantment with Western allies

The second factor promoting foreign policy change is a growing disenchantment in Turkey with its Western allies. The stalled process for Turkish membership in the European Union, and the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the EU without a political settlement for the divided island, loom large in the background here. However, there is also a perception in government and political circles in Turkey that Western nations in general, and the United States in particular, do not give Turkish national security interests much priority. In other words, there is a perception that Turkey is treated as a formal but not full member of the transatlantic community. U.S. disengagement from the Middle East after the Iraq operation, the Obama administration’s reluctance to get involved in Syria, and American support for the Kurdish YPG militia against the Islamic state are all taken as examples that scant attention is given to Turkey’s interests when decisions are made in Washington. This impression has been reinforced by growing Western criticism of Erdogan and the AKP government for authoritarianism, and mixed signals from Washington and Brussels to Turkey at the eve of the military coup attempt. There is a lingering suspicion in Turkey that Western leaders want to see Erdogan gone and that unspecified Western entities have given impetus to events such as the Gezipark-protests, the Gülen movements’ infiltration of the Turkish state, and indeed the July 15 coup attempt itself.

Concentration of executive power

The second development is concentration of executive power in the residency. With the transition from a parliamentary to a “strong” presidential system in Turkey, decision-making power has been transferred from the cabinet and other government institutions to the Presidential Palace. This process has also had consequences for foreign policy decision-making, which has been concentrated in the hands of the president himself and his close circle of advisers—including the Minister of National Defense, Hulusi Akar, the Head of National Intelligence, Hakan Fidan, and Special Adviser to the President, Ibrahim Kalin. At the same time, state institutions that used to be agenda setters in foreign policy—such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Security Council—have mostly been sidelined in the decision-making process. The role of the bureaucracy has thus been reduced to implementation of policy and the day-to-day management of foreign relations. Sidelining of the bureaucracy in foreign policy decision-making is not a new phenomenon in Turkish politics, of course, but the practice has become much more pronounced with the “strong” presidential system.

One important aspect of this development is the disappearance of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) as a factor in foreign policy making after the July 15, 2016, coup attempt. This has undoubtedly made it easier for the government to use military force projection as an instrument in its assertive foreign policy, as the TSK traditionally has been very cautious in the question of deployments abroad. For example, as late as in February 2016, the Turkish General Staff let it be known through the media that the TSK was opposed to the government’s wish for a military intervention in Syria. This signal was sufficient to temporarily silence the issue.

The concentration of executive power in the presidency has also allowed Erdogan to leave a direct imprint on foreign policy making after the July 15, 2016, coup attempt. This has undoubtedly made it easier for the government to use military force projection as an instrument in its assertive foreign policy, as the TSK traditionally has been very cautious in the question of deployments abroad. For example, as late as in February 2016, the Turkish General Staff let it be known through the media that the TSK was opposed to the government’s wish for a military intervention in Syria. This signal was sufficient to temporarily silence the issue.

The concentration of executive power in the presidency has also allowed Erdogan to leave a direct imprint on foreign policy decisions, circumventing professional bodies in the state. It can therefore be argued that Turkish foreign policy has been instrumentalized for domestic purposes and serves as a vehicle for the president’s personal political ambitions. For example, the highly defiant attitude taken against Western governments and institutions since July 15, 2016, can be seen as a reflection of Erdogan’s political style as a hard-hitting populist and as an attempt by the president to garner additional voter support ahead of elections.
Ideological turn toward hard-line nationalism

The governing coalition in Turkey over the last decade has undergone changes with a direct bearing on the country’s foreign and security policies. In the 2000s, the ruling AKP was a broad-based coalition of forces in Turkish politics, ranging from religious-conservatives to left-leaning liberals. These groups had a common goal in breaking the old republican elite’s hold on power and so ending Turkey’s tutelary democracy. The process for Turkish EU-membership with its requirements for democratic, economic, and judicial reforms was seen as the most efficient vehicle for ending the old republican order. This became a major motivation for comprehensive reforms at home and for forging close ties Europe.

However, over the next decade, Turkey’s EU project faded and AKP’s broad governing coalition fell apart. The ruling party has instead become an organization dominated by its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and largely controlled by his loyal supporters. Lacking a majority in the national assembly and faced with opposition from many quarters, Erdogan has also increasingly appealed to the nationalist right in Turkish politics and tapped into growing nationalist sentiments in the Turkish population. This ideological turn has resulted in a more hard-line nationalist policy from the Turkish government, in particular regarding the Kurdish question and the struggle against the PKK. Although it is difficult to discern exactly how much this turn has influenced foreign policy, it is likely to have strengthened such features as the focus on national security and a more assertive style.

In sum, we can say that a stronger focus on national security and a more assertive style in foreign policy have been promoted by changes in Turkey’s regional and domestic environment. These environmental changes have also constricted the country’s room for diplomatic maneuvering. At the same time, the policies of Western allies toward Turkey and the region have served as incentives for Ankara to pursue more transaction-based relations with the United States and Europe, and to forge flexible alliances with various states to achieve national foreign policy goals. Two domestic developments—concentration of executive power in the presidency and the ideological turn towards hard-line nationalism in government policy—have for their part reinforced these trends by promoting a more assertive and security-focused foreign policy.

Is there an international reorientation in Turkish foreign policy?

The heavy emphasis on national security under Erdogan stands in marked contrast to the amicable policy that characterized the Davutoglu era. Ankara’s foreign policy activism back then had a wide reach and was tied to a number of different issues. What Erdogan’s foreign policy shares with the Davutoglu era are regional great-power ambitions with the aim of becoming a mid-range power in international politics in the longer term. However, the notion of Turkey as a regional leader, facilitator, and political-cultural model for other Muslim nations has been toned down in favor of more narrowly defined national interests, often couched in security terms. Ideology is still important in Turkish foreign policy, but the moderate Islamism and notions of a Muslim community that characterized the Davutoglu period have been wedded to a nationalist outlook where Turkey and its national interests are placed front and center. Moreover, unfavorable political and economic developments for Turkey tend to be presented as “attacks” on the country by foreign interests. Official statements about why the Turkish lira lost almost half of its value against major currencies from January to August 2018 is a case in point.

Applying a concept from the Copenhagen school in security studies, we can speak of a securitization of Turkish foreign policy. Issues that were previously defined as political are moved into the area of security concerns, thereby legitimizing the application of extraordinary means to manage them. The Kurdish issue, the Syrian civil war, and the approach to the Gülen network at home and abroad fall into this category.
On the other hand, if we compare the national security outlook under Erdogan with Turkish foreign policy in the 1990s, we find striking continuities. For most of the 1990s, counterterrorism efforts against the PKK and troubled relations with Middle Eastern neighbors were two of the most pressing issues on Ankara’s foreign policy agenda. In 1998, for example, Turkey and Syria came to the brink of war over Syria’s harboring of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan.63

Rather than just speaking of securitization, we may also speak of a re-securitization of Turkish foreign policy, or a return to a policy more narrowly focused on national security issues—as was the case in the 1990s.64

The assertive style in Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan contrasts with the 2000s, when emphasis was on diplomatic negotiations and other forms of soft-power means to achieve foreign policy goals.65 Turkish diplomacy under Davutoglu was both activist and ambitious, but not assertive and focused on military power as under Erdogan. Turkey did conduct military operations abroad in the 2000s, but these operations were either carried out under the auspices of NATO or the United Nations, or were limited to cross-border operations against the PKK and its bases in Northern Iraq.

On the other hand, Ankara has also previously showed determination to act unilaterally and with military force when core national interests were at stake—even if this would bring Turkey into conflict with its NATO allies. In 1974, for example, Turkish forces invaded and occupied Northern Cyprus in an operation to preempt Greek plans for annexation of the island. The operation drew an outcry from Greece and international condemnation, and triggered a three-year U.S. arms embargo. There have also been countless military skirmishes between Turkey and fellow NATO member Greece over disputed areas in the Aegean Sea. In 1996, the two countries came close to a full-blown conflict over the islet of Imia before the United States managed to calm the situation.66

Consequently, it is also possible to see the assertive foreign policy line followed by Erdogan as a continuity of Turkish foreign policy from time before the AKP came to power in 2002. A novelty under Erdogan, though, is that assertiveness in diplomacy and in the use of military force projection has become a much-used instrument in Ankara’s foreign policy toolbox—not extraordinary measures.

A transaction-based foreign policy is not new for Turkey. Ankara’s bilateral cooperation with Russia since the end of the Cold War, for example, has been done on a transactional basis. Turkey and Russia have steadily strengthened their bilateral ties with increasing economic and energy cooperation. The only break in this upward trend was eight months of frozen relations after Turkey shot down a Russian military jet in the border area with Syria in November 2015. However, relations have been compartmentalized in the sense that the two countries, with few exceptions, kept security and defense concerns outside bilateral cooperation.

The significant change under Erdogan is that Turkey seems to be taking the same transactional approach toward its Western allies as toward Russia.67

With its consistent policy against Austria in NATO, Turkey is perceived as having moved the limits of acceptable behavior within the alliance.68 However, exercising a principle of reciprocity is not totally new in Ankara’s approach to NATO. Turkey, for example, blocked high-level meetings between NATO and the EU as a response to the admission of the Republic of Cyprus as an EU member and Cyprus’s blocking of Turkey’s own accession process to the EU.69 On the other hand, Turkey has not been in the habit of using of its veto to obtain benefits from or exercise pressure on alliance partners regarding issues that are external to NATO’s agenda. For example, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ankara did not consider blocking the accession of Eastern European states to NATO as a way to force a promise of Turkish EU membership—even if this must have seemed a tempting possibility at the time.70

Ankara’s quest for greater strategic autonomy is not a new endeavor, either. Even during the Cold War, the United States and other fellow NATO members remained “friends not to be
trusted” in Turkish security thinking. The seeds of mistrust was sown by such events as the unilateral U.S. decision to dismantle Jupiter missiles stationed in Turkey during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1963, and the U.S. weapons embargo against Turkey (1975–78)—a response to the Turkish invasion and occupation of Northern Cyprus in 1974. It was this embargo most of all that alerted Ankara to the need for developing a national defense industry in order to reduce Turkey’s dependency on Western suppliers. Efforts to become self-sufficient in defense equipment were further boosted under the AKP governments in the 2000s, resulting in indigenous production of more high-tech weapons such as armored UAVs.

The end of the Cold War led to a further questioning in Turkey of the country’s continued reliance on NATO for its national security. Ankara feared both abandonment and entrapment by its Western allies. On the one hand, Turkey faced domestic and regional security threats that did not necessarily coincide with those of its allies, and could consequently not count on their support for counteracting them. Turkey’s long, lone struggle against the PKK, inside and outside its own borders, is probably the best example of such perceived “abandonment.” On the other hand, Western security interests in Turkey’s neighborhood could potentially serve to involve Turkey in regional conflicts that are contrary to Turkish national interests. For this reason, the Kuwait War in 1991, the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, and NATO’s Libya operation in 2011 were all highly controversial issues in Turkey. The first real indication of Ankara’s willingness to break ranks with its major strategic ally, the United States, came in 2003 when the Turkish Grand National Assembly voted against letting U.S. forces use Turkish territory as a deployment area for the impending invasion of Iraq.

Under Erdogan, however, the quest for strategic autonomy seems to have been taken a step further, as demonstrated by Ankara’s willingness to enter into flexible alliances with erstwhile adversaries (Russia and Iran) in order to achieve certain security and defense goals, and even at the peril of upsetting established relations with Western allies.

In sum, the features of Turkish foreign policy under President Erdogan represent both change and continuity compared to previous periods in Turkey’s modern history. The real change is in how these features are combined. A strong focus on national security is wedded to assertive methods and means, and a preference for relations based on transactions and interests rather than institutions and values. Turkey is also seeking more strategic autonomy by means of flexible alliances. This feature can be regarded as novelty under Erdogan, even if greater autonomy has been a goal for Turkey in earlier periods as well.

Whether this particular configuration of Turkish foreign policy also implies an international reorientation or restructuring is debatable. The quest for more strategic autonomy by means of flexible alliances—sometimes also at the expense of established relations with Western allies—can be taken as an indication of restructuring. On the other hand, these flexible alliances appear to be limited in scope and time, and there are no concrete indications that Ankara is leaving the Euro-Atlantic community.

Turkey’s main anchorage in the West is its membership in NATO. Should Turkey reorient its foreign policy, it would most likely be toward either alignment with one or more non-Western states or some form of nonaligned status. In both cases, a concrete indication of reorientation would be Turkish disengagement from NATO.

In case of a realignment, Russia, or a group of states including Russia, stand out as the most likely alternative to NATO for Turkey. This is because Russia is the only power in Turkey’s vicinity with the ability and (possibly also) willingness to provide Ankara with credible security guarantees.

Based on these premises, there is little to suggest that Turkey is reorienting its foreign policy. Relations between Turkey and Russia have warmed considerably during Erdogan’s presidency, especially following the July 15, 2016, military coup attempt in Turkey when President Putin gave Erdogan and the Turkish government his unconditional support. The two leaders have since
seemed to be on excellent terms, and Ankara’s diplomatic tone toward Moscow has been markedly more hushed and positive than the one used toward many of Turkey’s Western allies. Bilateral cooperation between the two countries is back to the high levels it was on prior to Turkey’s downing of a Russian military jet in November 2015, and relations have recently expanded into the fields of security and defense. The latter development can be perceived as heralding a further expansion and deepening of relations with Russia—including in military cooperation.76

Nevertheless, there is no turn toward Russia as such.77 The positive development in bilateral relations is mainly based on overlapping interests in certain policy areas and on the good personal relationship between Erdogan and Putin.78 It is not based on any deeper sense of community between the two nations. Moreover, bilateral cooperation is still largely compartmentalized—even if cooperation has been extended into the security field.

Turkey also appears to be using security cooperation with the Russians just as much to increase its own bargaining power vis-à-vis the West as out of a wish to align itself closer to Russia.79 This strategy seems to have been met by some success, too, first and foremost by moving the United States on its support for the YPG militia in Northern Syria.

In addition, there are two important factors that serve to limit a further expansion of Turkey–Russia ties in the field of security and defense.

First, there is no real community of interest between the two.80 Turkey and Russia have been adversaries rather than allies throughout most of their modern histories, and this still shapes their perception of each other.81 The two countries also have diverging security interests today. Admittedly, Turkey and Russia have overlapping interests in Syria, which has also become a basis for cooperation between them there. However, in other areas such as the Black Sea and the Caucasus, the two countries are on opposite sides—from Nagorno-Karabakh and Chechnya to Georgia, the Crimea, and Ukraine. Ankara is also increasingly concerned about Russia’s resurgence and ambitions in its immediate neighborhood—especially the build-up of military forces and increasing influence in the Black Sea. Turkey is no longer the dominant power in this area. However, it is the custodian of the Montreux Treaty from 1936 and does not welcome any power shifts that could jeopardize the treaty and Turkish control over the strategically important straits between the Black Sea and the Aegean.82 Consequently, and despite its current military cooperation with Russia in Syria, Ankara fears a possible future encirclement by Russian forces to its north, east, and south.83

The second reason is that Turkey’s increasing dependence on Russia in other fields than security poses a future security risk. Bilateral cooperation between the two is uneven and skewed in Russia’s favor. Russia is today the third-largest export market for Turkey after China and Germany, and supplies roughly half of Turkey’s need for natural gas.84 Energy cooperation has recently been extended into the nuclear field with the construction of a reactor facility that will be built, owned, and operated by Russia.85 This increasing reliance on Russia for trade and energy could potentially be translated into political pressure on Ankara from Moscow. Russian sanctions against Turkey after the downing of the military jet in November 2015 also demonstrated the kind of damage Russia is able to inflict upon the Turkish economy—if it wishes to do so. Turkey lost at least USD 10 billion as a result of these sanctions, amounting to more than 1% of the country’s total GDP.86

Given diverging security interests and growing inequalities in the bilateral relationship, Turkey is more likely to try to balance against Russia than to expand security and defense cooperation with Moscow much further.87 The latter course of action would only serve to increase Turkey’s dependence on and vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia, and therefore go against Ankara’s goal of greater strategic autonomy.

Regarding NATO, there are obvious challenges associated with Turkey’s politicization of its own role in the alliance—on both the political and the operational levels. On the other hand, there is little to suggest that Turkey has any immediate plans to disengage from NATO.
On the contrary, Turkey appears committed to NATO and a future role for itself within the alliance. In official statements, the Turkish government underlines the continued importance of NATO for Turkey’s security, and continued Turkish support for the alliance. Ankara’s total contributions to NATO in terms of forces and facilities also seem to confirm this official line. Furthermore, despite the incident at Exercise Trident Javelin in Stavanger, November 2017, Turkey has continued to participate in later NATO exercises as planned—and without any similar occurrences. Overall, then, there are few indications that Turkey is planning to downscale its role in NATO by leaving the military cooperation or resigning from the alliance altogether. If anything, Turkey’s role in NATO is likely to increase in the coming years due to the plans for its future responsibility for NATO’s new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force.

Turkey also has at least three strong motives for remaining in NATO.

The first is about national prestige and historical ambitions. Through NATO, Turkey is part of the transatlantic community or, on a more abstract level, “the West.” Modernization and Westernization has been a central goal since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, and a withdrawal from NATO—the most important link between Turkey and the West—would mean a major step back from this long-term ambition. Despite the often anti-Western rhetoric of the Erdogan government, Turkey is not likely to sever its most important institutional affiliation with the United States and Europe through 65 years. Neither should such rhetoric be taken as an expression of a more deeply felt anti-Westernism in the Turkish government. It rather implies a lack of interest in the West, because Western allies cannot or will not contribute positively to Ankara’s foreign policy agenda. The AKP government appears to prefer relations with the West over the alternatives. Such a preference is expressed in the AKP’s 2018 election manifesto, which clearly states that Turkey wants to overcome the problems in bilateral relations with the United States and preserve close cooperation with the United States. Erdogan could therefore quickly make a line change if he perceived that Turkish interests were taken seriously by Western counterparts.

NATO membership also gives Turkey influence in international politics that the country would not otherwise have. The alliance is the only international organization of importance that gives Turkey a voice and veto rights on par with the United States and Europe. This is a position that Ankara is not likely to forgo. Since NATO is a consensus-based organization, members of the alliance can block proposals they perceive as contrary to their national interests. For better or worse, it is this position that gives Turkey the possibility to block Austria’s participation in the alliance.

The third and most important reason is security. Despite many changes in the international and regional environment since the end of the Cold War, Turkish and NATO interests converge regarding Russia, as well as in countering international terrorism and regional instability. Moreover, nonalignment is not likely to give Turkey the same kind of security guarantees that NATO is able to provide.

In sum, the features of Turkish foreign policy under President Erdogan represent both change and continuity compared to previous periods in Turkey’s modern history. The real change is in how these features are combined. A strong focus on national security is wedded to assertive methods and means, and a preference for relations based on transactions and interests rather than institutions and values.

Flexible alliances also represent a novel way for Turkey to pursue its goal of strategic autonomy, although the goal itself has been an element of Turkish policy for some time. Flexible alliances do not by themselves imply that Ankara intends to disengage from the Euro-Atlantic community any time soon. As a result of its quest for greater autonomy, Turkey has come closer to Russia and other non-Western powers under Erdogan, and at the same time has experienced a more conflictual relationship with Western allies. Still, there are obvious limits to the bilateral
relationship with Russia. The change in foreign policy under Erdogan does not appear to herald a change in Turkey’s international orientation either toward realignment or nonalignment.

Erdogan’s foreign policy is perhaps best understood in the words of Ömer Taspinar, as a result of rising Turkish self-confidence and independence vis-à-vis the West.95 There has been a strong element of self-realization in the foreign policy vision of Turkey since the end of the Cold War, and under Erdogan this element has been wedded to a realist-based foreign policy. Ankara is therefore increasingly acting on its own to secure what it perceives as core national interests—even if it means defying Western allies. This undoubtedly makes Turkey a more challenging partner for the United States and Europe, but it does not by itself signal a more fundamental reorientation of Turkish foreign policy away from the West.

Notes
5. Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsmann, “Introduction: Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy,” in *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*, edited by Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsmann, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.
11. Ibid., 3.
20. Author’s interview no. 12, with foreign policy analyst. Brussels, December 2017.
24. Interview no. 4.
30. Author’s interview no. 6, with foreign policy researcher, Ankara, November 2017.
32. Author’s interview no. 1, with head of foreign policy think tank. Ankara, November 2017.
36. Interview no. 1.
40. Author’s interview no. 7, with foreign policy researcher. Istanbul, November 2017; International Crisis Group, “Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus,” ICG Europe & Central Asia Report,


44. Interview no. 5.


46. Interview no. 1, with head of foreign policy think tank. Ankara, November 2017; Interview no. 4.

47. Interview no. 3.

48. Interview no. 1.

49. Authors’ notes from closed NATO roundtable at Kadir Has University, Istanbul, November 2017.

50. Interview no. 1.

51. Author’s interview no. 19, with foreign policy researcher, Istanbul, February 2019.

52. Author’s interview no. 7, with foreign policy researcher. Istanbul, November 2017.

53. Author’s interview no. 10, with head of political think tank. Istanbul, November 2017; author’s interview no. 16, with foreign affairs journalist. Istanbul, October 2018.

54. Author’s interview no. 17 with foreign policy researcher. Ankara, October 2018.


56. Interview no. 7.


67. Interview no. 1.

68. Author’s interview no. 14, with NATO official. Brussels, December 2017.


71. Philip Robins, Suits and Uniforms. Turkish Foreign Policy Since the Cold War (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), 100.

72. Interview no. 11.
74. Güvenc and Özöl, “NATO and Turkey.”
75. Author’s interview no. 13, with foreign policy analyst. Brussels, December 2017.
76. Interview no. 3.
77. Interview no. 6.
79. Interview no. 11.
81. Interview no. 1; Interview no. 6.
82. Interview no. 2
83. Interview no. 6
86. International Crisis Group, “Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea.”
87. Interview no. 7.
89. Interview no. 1; Interview no. 12.
91. Interview no. 1
92. Interview no. 2
94. Interview no. 7; Author’s interview no. 8, with security policy analyst. Istanbul, November 2017.

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