

Turkish National Security Strategy: Evolution, Characteristics, and Practices

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Abstract: Over the past century since the Republic of Türkiye was founded, its national security mechanisms have undergone a process of transformation from military-dominated to civilian government-dominated, and the ideology guiding its national security strategy has gradually transitioned from Kemalism to Erdoğanism. At the present stage, Türkiye's national security strategy is prominently characterized by its geographical and cultural duality, the expansivity deep-rooted in its history and religion, and an enterprising response to its geopolitical realities. Such a strategy will comprehensively shape Türkiye's practice of preserving national security and guide the future of its security policies, prompting the country to seek a balance between its differentiated perceptions of identity and generalized national interests.

Keywords: diverse identity, national security strategy, Türkiye

Since its declaration about a century ago, the Republic of Türkiye has always placed a high premium on its security. From the monopoly of secularism to multi-political party contest over state power and then to the rise of moderate Islamist parties, Türkiye's national security mechanisms, perceptions, and guiding ideologies have never lost their importance despite undergoing several transformations along with shifting power structures. Blending unique geographical, cultural, historical, and religious factors and based on practical needs, Türkiye's present national security strategy is prominently characterized by plurality, expansivity, and enterprise. The National Security Council (MGK)

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chaired by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is Türkiye’s core policymaking body on national security, responsible for national security, military, and foreign policy matters, periodically releasing national security-related policy documents and coordinating among various government agencies to ensure implementation, thus providing the necessary guarantees for realizing the new vision of “Türkiye’s Century.”

I. Evolution of Turkish National Security Perceptions and Mechanisms

Since its declaration in 1923, the Republic of Türkiye has experienced many coups, with the ruling groups frequently changing. Concurrently, its national security perceptions and mechanisms have evolved greatly, characterized by a military–civil struggle over the dominance of national security strategic policymaking.

A. “Military guardianship” period (1920s–1990s) characterized by military supremacy over civilian politics

The Republic of Türkiye was born on the rubble of the Ottoman Empire, as a combined result of World War I and the Turkish national liberation movement. Due to its unique history, national security issues have long occupied a special and important position in Türkiye’s domestic agendas, and the military has played a pivotal role in safeguarding the Republic’s security. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was the founder and first President of the modern state of Türkiye and Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK), undertook sweeping social and economic reforms using tough and drastic measures, including the separation of government and religious affairs, the closure of Islamic courts, the introduction of European legal and political systems, the change of Turkish traditional dress and alphabet, and the improvement of women’s status. These reforms reshaped the identity of Türkiye and its citizens, carving a modern, Westernized, and secular development path for the country and gradually creating a systematic nationalist ideology—Kemalism. Led by the President, the TSK naturally became the guardian of Kemalism, enjoying unfettered transcendence in the country’s power structure. Unlike “military governments” in the usual sense, the Turkish military is aimed at supervising the civilian governments rather than overthrowing them: in case

government policies, domestic or foreign, deviate from Atatürk's established route, the military will come forward and rectify the "deviation" in the form of a coup; after transforming the government and signing new political contracts, the military will return power to civilian control. Thus, Türkiye has formed a unique "military guardianship" system, exerting far-reaching impacts on its national security perceptions and strategic policymaking.

Turkish national security perceptions during this period were shaped by military leaders, diplomats, and secular elites. Despite being a minority in Turkish society, they dominated state power and had a strong consensus on secularism, Westernization, and nationalism. Their perceptions concerning national security were as follows: (i) defending against foreign aggression, preventing a tragedy similar to the partition of the Ottoman Empire from happening again, and staying vigilant against extra-regional powers' and regional neighbors' infringing on Türkiye's territory and interests; (ii) preventing the division of Türkiye by shaping a brand new, unified "national identity" and strongly suppressing the secessionist tendency of ethnic minorities, especially the Kurds; (iii) maintaining Türkiye's secular nature, stringently separating religion from social life, and taking strict precautions against the infiltration and spread of Islamic extremism; and (iv) promoting Westernization and modernization as the important factors that create wealth, build strength, and stimulate the development potential of the country. In addition, Turkish national security strategy in this period also prioritized hard power, firmly advocated for alliances with the United States (US) and Europe, maintained vigilance against Soviet expansion, and applied defensive non-intervention in the Middle East.

Led by Westernized political elites, primarily top military officials, Turkish security agencies operated relatively independently from the political institutions, leading to a "reversion of power": instead of being circumscribed by the parliament and the Prime Minister, Turkish security services contrarily supervised and intervened in executive agencies. The first step taken by Türkiye for a national security architecture was the foundation of the Supreme Defense Assembly, which was assigned with national mobilization issues by a 1933 decree. From 1949, the Turkish military conveniently used the Cold War, which had just begun, to set up a series of specialized agencies in charge of national

security and defense matters to facilitate the distribution of resources and wartime coordination and enhance defense. In May 1960, the military staged the first coup d'état in the history of the Republic, citing that “the country’s democracy is under threat.” In the aftermath of the coup, the MGK was created and written into the 1961 Constitution. Compared with its counterparts in other countries, the MGK was more interested in domestic issues in its infancy, with its agenda set and decisions made almost single-handedly by the military.¹ In March 1971, infuriated by the Islamist movement, which had become increasingly radical in Türkiye, the military issued a memorandum to the President and the parliament, demanding the formation of a new government and igniting the second coup in the history of the Republic (known as the “coup by memorandum”). Backed by the military, the constitution was amended and the MGK was made more powerful, becoming a core agency responsible for legislative reforms, political decision-making, and guiding military operations at the macro level. In September 1980, the third military coup took place, intended to end the turmoil of political violence caused by the strife among the extreme leftists, extreme rightists, and Islamists. The 1982 Constitution adopted after the coup further strengthened the roles of the military and the MGK. According to the 1982 Constitution, the General Commander of the Gendarmerie was included in the MGK, thus expanding the military’s power in decision-making on major national security issues; the Council of Ministers should give priority consideration to the decisions of the MGK. From “communicating the requisite fundamental recommendations to the Council of Ministers” to “submitting to the Council of Ministers its views on taking decisions,” the MGK gradually extended its reach to the executive, judicial, and legislative branches. Last but not least, the 1982 Constitution conferred a vague responsibility to the MGK for preserving “the peace and security of society,” which essentially erased the power boundaries between the security services and the military, affording the MGK vast room for operations. Thereafter, the MGK became the military’s most important and most effective institutional tool to intervene in politics, long sitting at the core of state power.

¹ Ayşegül Kars Kaynar, “Political Activism of the National Security Council in Turkey after the Reforms,” *Armed Forces & Society*, No. 3 (July 2017): 523–544.

B. Parliamentary republic period (late 20th century–early 21st century) characterized by the rise of civilian governments

After the end of the Cold War, Türkiye quickened its pace toward Westernization and joining the European Union (EU), comprehensively aligning itself with the EU in political systems, economic reforms, and security strategies. Ironically, despite the fact that the Turkish military has been a vanguard of Westernization, one of the necessary conditions the country had to fulfill for EU membership was to limit the military's power and reduce its intervention in politics. It became imperative for Türkiye to reform its national security mechanisms. Correspondingly, the operational and power distribution patterns of the MGK and its supporting agencies, such as State Security Courts (DGMs), began to shift.

In the late 1990s, to gain candidacy for EU membership, Türkiye banned military officers from serving as judges or prosecutors of the DGMs in line with the requirements of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which marked the kickoff of the reform process of its national security services. In 2001, Türkiye's parliament—the Grand National Assembly (TBMM)—approved amendments to the Constitution, increasing the number of civilians in the MGK and reducing the power of its decisions to that of simple recommendation.¹ However, given the military's deep-rooted authority, revisions of the Constitution alone could not immediately alter its dominance in state power. Issuing memoranda via the MGK, the military retained its grip on Turkish national security policies and guided the directions of Türkiye's economy and foreign relations.

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a moderate Islamist party, came to power in 2002, Türkiye has significantly sped up reforming its national security institutions and mechanisms for the dual purposes of initiating as soon as possible the negotiations over joining the EU and ensuring the stable rule of the Islamist party by reducing the power of the Turkish military as a steward of secularism. In 2003, new arrangements were made with respect to the MGK through amendments to Law No. 2945 (issued in 1983): the MGK meetings were scheduled to take place bi-monthly instead of once a month;

¹ Umit Cizre, "Demythologizing the National Security Concept: The Case of Turkey," *Middle East Journal*, No. 2 (2003): 213–229.

the Deputy Prime Minister secured the coordination and implementation of MGK's decisions in case they were approved by the Council of Ministers; the Chief of the General Staff of the TSK's power to propose an extraordinary meeting was repealed; the appointment of a civilian Secretary-General (SG) of the MGK has become possible, breaking with the tradition of choosing from among incumbent generals since 1961. The reforms greatly reduced the power of the SG of the MGK, abolishing its authority to follow up the implementation of MGK's decisions and right of access to civilian public agencies or legal persons.¹ Meanwhile, key institutions under the MGK such as the political, intelligence collection and analysis, and public relations offices were abolished, and the military was restricted from interfering in politics or influencing public issues via the MGK.

Although the EU was not completely satisfied with the abovementioned reforms of the MGK, the AKP still labeled these reforms as a milestone in Türkiye's political democratization. On the one hand, the above reforms effectively weakened the military's dominance in Turkish national security policymaking, leaving the civilian governments with the main responsibility for formulating and implementing national security policies. Thus, the MGK gradually shifted from a "giant vying for power with the Council of Ministers" to an "advisory body to the government." On the other hand, the military's influence on the MGK did not completely disappear, retaining the power to "take over the government to eliminate internal threats when necessary." For a relatively long period after 2004, the MGK served as an important agency discussing national security matters and coordinating social mobilization, as well as an arena where military-government contest was witnessed over the dominance of Turkish national security strategic policymaking.

Türkiye's national security policies during this period included principles for internal, diplomatic, and defense actions, which were determined by the Council of Ministers based on MGK's recommendations to safeguard national security and achieve national goals. Once every five years, the MGK updated its top-secret National Security Policy Document (commonly known as the Red

¹ "About Us," Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Secretariat-General of the National Security Council, <https://www.mgk.gov.tr/en/index.php/secretariat-general/about-us>.

Book)¹ to advance relevant policies. New elements related to development also emerged in the Turkish government's cognition of national security threats. Domestically, apart from cracking down hard on separatist terrorism, religious extremism, and left-wing extremism, the Turkish government also paid close heed to potential risks that could cause social turmoil, such as unemployment, income inequality, and regional development imbalances. Internationally, Türkiye followed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) standards and listed international terrorism, drugs and human trafficking, and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) among national security threats. Moreover, Türkiye argued that the sharing of water resources in the Middle East, rights and interests in Cyprus, and control of Black Sea transits also concerned its national security and interests, calling, for the first time, for greater attention to asymmetric and non-traditional threats beyond conventional military ones.

C. New presidential system period (2017–present) characterized by Erdoğan's dominance

The Arab Spring that swept across the Middle East in 2011 threw the majority of regional countries into turmoil, paving the way for the rise of political Islam. In the same year, Türkiye's gross domestic product grew at an annual rate of 11.2%, approaching \$1 trillion and making it the largest economy in the Middle East. Under Erdoğan's leadership, the AKP won the parliamentary election in Türkiye for the third time, achieving new highs in public support. The stark contrast between internal and external situations has fueled changes in Türkiye's political ecology. (i) The Islamist tendency inherent in the AKP's ideology has gained momentum. The party is inclined to strengthen Türkiye's Islamic character and position Türkiye as the "leader of the Islamic world" by supporting and uniting political Islamists in the region. (ii) Erdoğan's desire for power has risen. He intended to break out of the supervision and restrictions imposed by the parliamentary system on the

¹ The National Security Policy Document (Milli Güvenlik Siyaset Belgesi, or MGSB) is not a legal document, but a political and strategic concept document, also known as Türkiye's "secret constitution." It is usually prepared and released by the MGK. Other agencies, such as the Ministry of the Interior, the National Intelligence Organization, and the General Staff of the TSK, will provide opinions and help with possible revisions. During the effective period of MGSB, no other laws or regulations should contradict the document. The content of MGSB is highly confidential; anyone leaking its detailed information will face prosecution and trial.

executive head, transform the political system into a presidential one, assume state power, and put himself on a par with Türkiye's founding father Atatürk. Unsurprisingly, such trends toward "Islamization" and "centralization" will raise concerns and interference from the Turkish military. In July 2016, a failed coup took place in Türkiye. A radical faction within the TSK, organized as the Peace at Home Council, attempted to take over the government and oust Erdoğan, which was finally defeated by forces loyal to the President.

After the easing of the coup attempt, Erdoğan immediately conducted purges and reforms of the TSK, further weakening the military's power. He placed the General Staff, the highest authority of the TSK, and the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) under the direct command of the President—i.e., the Chief of the General Staff and the Director of the MIT, previously responsible to the Prime Minister, will report directly to the President now. Moreover, the Commanders of the Army, Navy, and Air Force will report to the Minister of National Defense; the Gendarmerie and the Coast Guard, previously subordinated to the TSK, are now led by the Ministry of the Interior; all military schools administered by the General Staff will be dissolved and replaced with a new National Defense University supervised by the Ministry of National Defense; all military hospitals will go under the Ministry of Health; the proportion of civilian officials in the Supreme Military Council (YAŞ) will be raised to exceed military ones; Deputy Prime Minister (replaced by Vice President after 2018) and Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice, and the Interior entered the YAŞ and took a part in the nomination and promotion of military officials. These measures dealt a final blow to the tradition of "military guardianship," giving the civilian government complete control over the TSK and laying down the foundations for a presidential system that centralizes executive powers. Thus, the ruling party, especially the President, has dominated the strategic policymaking concerning national security.

In April 2017, Türkiye held a referendum, approving amendments to the Constitution and replacing the parliamentary system of government with a presidential one. As a result, the TBMM's power was greatly reduced, losing its check on the government; the judiciary has become a vassal of the executive power as well, with judicial appointments and removals dictated

by the presidency and the ruling party. In the presidential election held in June 2018, the first after the government system was changed, Erdoğan was elected, simultaneously serving as the head of government, the head of state, the Commander-in-Chief of the TSK, and the leader of the ruling party, whose power is almost unrestricted. Under the new system, the power structure within the MGK has changed accordingly: the President now chairs the MGK and has been authorized to convoke extraordinary meetings, if deemed necessary; other members of the MGK, including Vice Presidents, Ministers of Justice, National Defense, the Interior, and Foreign Affairs, the Chief of the General Staff of the TSK, and Force Commanders, are all nominated by and responsible to the President. The personal will of Erdoğan and the ideologies and interests of the AKP have become the key factors determining Türkiye's national security priorities and cognition of threats.

During this period, Türkiye has significantly broadened its cognition of external national security threats. An increased number of diplomatic issues have been included in the category of national security, such as energy development and pipeline construction in the eastern Mediterranean, the Syrian civil war and the "security zone" on the Türkiye–Syria border, the Libyan civil war and the maritime cooperation between Türkiye and the Government of National Accord of Libya, the interests of Turkic-speaking peoples worldwide, Islamophobia in Western countries, the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict in Transcaucasia, and the relationship between the federal government of Iraq and the autonomous Kurdistan Region. Most recently, the Turkish government has linked Türkiye's national security with the geopolitical tensions caused by the Ukraine crisis and the Palestine–Israel conflict. Such a phenomenon of pan-securitization has not been unusual in the evolutionary history of Turkish national security perceptions. Back in the old days of "military guardianship," the Turkish military overstretched domestic security issues with an attempt to fully intervene in the political and social life in the name of "national security." The present overstressing of external security issues is essentially a manifestation of the outward expansion of Türkiye's national interests and its enterprising foreign policy in the field of security.

II. Causes and Characteristics of Turkish National Security Strategy

Due to its unique geographic position, history, and religion, Türkiye has a strategic culture characterized by the parallel coexistence of East and West, modernity and tradition, continentality and oceanity, and conservatism and adventurism, which has impacted the country's perceptions of national security from different or even opposite directions.

A. Strategic duplicity based on geography and culture

Türkiye is a transcontinental country spanning both Asia and Europe, with 97% of its territory located in Anatolia (also known as Asia Minor) and 3% in East Thrace in Southeast Europe. It is often deemed a “bridge between East and West.” Topographically, the central and eastern parts of Türkiye are dominated by high plateaus and mountains, with well-developed agriculture and distinct continental features. The country is encircled by seas on three sides: the Black Sea to the north, the Aegean Sea to the west, and the Mediterranean Sea to the south. With 7,200 kilometers of coastline, Türkiye also contains the Sea of Marmara in the northwest. Facing each other across the water, Türkiye and the European maritime civilization are as closely linked as lips and teeth. Socially and culturally, the landlocked Asian Türkiye—the central and eastern portions of the country—is relatively lagging in terms of economic development, and the way of life and values of its residents are more conservative, retaining strong Islamic traditions. By comparison, Türkiye's west coast is adjacent to Europe and more advanced economically, and the way of life and values there are more Westernized, open, and supportive of secularism and separation of government and religious affairs. Such distinctions have created “two Türkiyes”—one Eastern, one Western; one Asian, one European—and shaped Türkiye's multifaceted identity. It is a secular, democratic country, with political and economic systems closely resembling those of Europe and, at the same time, massive systems of religious education and organization, maintaining a lot of non-Western traditions in social life. It is a candidate member state of the EU, widely deemed a “quasi-European country” and self-proclaimed the “head of all Turkic states,” actively promoting the integration and cooperation with Turkic-speaking countries in Central Asia and Transcaucasia. It is a member of NATO and a key ally of the US-led West, but also a founding member of the

Organization of the Islamic Cooperation and an important part of the Islamic world. The above seemingly contradictory identities reflect the different faces of Türkiye, influencing its national security priorities in different periods and constituting the fundamental reason behind the pronounced duplicity or even multiplicity of its national security strategy.

American geopolitical scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that Türkiye “is pulled in three directions: the modernists would like to see it become a European state and thus look to the west; the Islamists lean in the direction of the Middle East and a Muslim community and thus look to the south; and the historically minded nationalists see in the Turkic peoples of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia a new mission for a regionally dominant Turkey and thus look eastward.”¹ These are different strategic directions. When the secular elites who followed Kemalism were in power, they emphasized Türkiye’s character as a continental country and its European identity, placing the strategic pivot in Europe. Internationally, they focused on defense and highlighted the foundational and guiding role of the Army in the TSK. They positioned NATO at the core of Türkiye’s national security architecture, actively engaging in military cooperation with NATO and undertaking Alliance responsibilities. They embraced the mainstream values and security perceptions of the US and Europe and placed great importance on nuclear nonproliferation, energy security, environmental degradation, and other non-traditional security issues. They admired European nation-state systems, advocated for the separation of government and religious affairs, strongly opposed religious interventions in state power, laws, education, and social life, and viewed political Islam, which transcends national and ethnic borders, as a major threat to national security. Since coming to power, Erdoğan and his AKP have made critical adjustments to the Atatürk-era security strategic framework, including: restoring Türkiye’s Islamic identity, emphasizing the country’s Turkic character, modifying the one-sided strategic tilt toward Europe, and slowly reverting to the south (the Middle East) and the east (Central Asia) to create a “balance between Europe and Asia” that increases Türkiye’s strategic depth;

¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (BasicBooks, 1997), 134.

emphasizing maritime interests, boosting Türkiye's maritime character, and hastening the modernization of the Turkish Naval Forces; calling for the return of religion without denying Türkiye's secular nature, emphasizing the role of a Muslim identity in social cohesion and mobilization, and no longer seeing political Islam as a national security risk. However, all these adjustments do not mean a total repudiation of the strategic directions and security concerns of the Atatürk era; conversely, they have mirrored more comprehensively the plurality of Türkiye's strategic culture and unleashed more thoroughly the country's room and strengths in balancing between East and West based on its unique geography and culture. Looking ahead, with intensifying power competition among different political factions, the duplicity and volatility of Türkiye's national security strategy will become increasingly evident.

B. Strategic expansivity rooted in history and religion

The predecessor of modern Türkiye was the Ottoman Empire, which lasted more than 600 years, from its foundation in 1299 until its dissolution in 1923. It was the last military empire ruled by theocracy in human history, located at the center of interactions between Eastern and Western civilizations and spanning three continents, namely, Asia, Europe, and Africa, at its height. Over a long period, the Ottoman Empire controlled the land routes across Eurasia and was the sole Islamic power capable of counterbalancing the newly emerging European Christian countries during the 15–19th century. Despite having disintegrated under the impact of modern industrial civilization, the Ottoman Empire left Türkiye with extremely rich and complex legacies.

Status as “the leader of the Islamic world.” The Ottoman Empire was an important link in the evolution of the Islamic civilization, inheriting the Arabic empire of the classical Islamic world and opening modern nation-states in the Middle East. Islam was its official religion. Internally, the Ottoman sultans, who claimed the title of “*caliph*” (the supreme politico-religious leader of the Islamic world as the successor or agent of Prophet Muhammad), ruled the empire by *Sharia* (Islamic law) and promoted Sunni Islam as the dominant identity within its borders. Externally, the Ottoman Empire mobilized troops in the name of “*jihad*” to expand territory and spread Islam to Central and Eastern Europe, the Pacific, and the Atlantic. Although the empire's religious policy was relatively tolerant, allowing monotheists such as Christians, Orthodoxes,

and Jews to live normally as long as they paid taxes regularly, Islam and *Sharia* enjoyed undoubted primacy over other religions, and Muslims were entitled to privileges over other religious groups. The role of the Ottoman Empire as the leader and heart of the Islamic world has been widely acknowledged.

Tangled ethnic relations. The Ottoman Empire controlled a vast territory and was composed of many different ethnic groups. With the progress of military conquest, the empire widely spread its religion, politico-economic systems, and way of life, establishing shared, blended, and inseparable bonds between different regions and ethnic groups both historically and culturally. In the late Ottoman period, however, the empire was shocked by European nationalism. Independence movements were initiated one after another by non-Muslim minorities such as Greeks, Serbs, Armenians, and Bulgarians, igniting intense conflicts with Turks and the Ottoman government. These conflicts and hatred did not disappear with the proclamation of the Turkish Republic but contrarily have continued and evolved into diplomatic and security issues facing modern-day Türkiye. Examples include Türkiye's long-term confrontation with Greece over Cyprus, controversy with Armenia over the late Ottoman genocide, and the Kurdish challenge that has plagued Türkiye for years.

Ideologies of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism. From the second half of the 19th century, a trend of drifting apart gained momentum within the Ottoman Empire. To maintain his precarious rule and stop the collapse of the empire, the Ottoman sultan started the pan-Islamic movement centered on the caliphate to mobilize the Muslim world in unity against European powers such as Russia, Britain, and France under the flag of "Ottoman." Such a movement failed in the end.¹ Subsequently, rulers of the Ottoman Empire and members of the Young Turks turned to pan-Turkism, which had originated from Russia, in an attempt to shape a new national identity through a national revival movement and take part in the military contest among imperialist countries through alliances with other Turkic-speaking peoples. Both failing to save the Ottoman Empire though, pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism as social ideologies have left widespread and far-reaching impacts.

¹ Zan Tao, *Modern State and Nation Building: A Study on Turkish Nationalism in the Early 20th Century* (SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2011), 126–136.

The “Sèvres Syndrome.”¹ Defeated in World War I, the Ottoman Empire was forced to sign the Treaty of Sèvres, ceding large parts of territory and sovereignty and granting privileges, such as compulsory taxation and extraterritoriality, to the victorious Allied powers. This treaty encountered violent opposition from Turkish nationalists, igniting the Turkish War of Independence. Nowadays, although the Sèvres Treaty was abolished, its shadows still linger in the minds of the Turkish people, shaping a common stance among all political factions characterized by a high level of vigilance against foreign influence and sensitivity and toughness toward territorial and sovereignty issues.

The legacy of the Ottoman Empire has shaped modern Türkiye’s strategic directions and security perceptions both positively and negatively. Nationalists headed by Atatürk deemed the empire’s failure a “shame” and the newly founded Turkish Republic a “victim” of the empire, therefore calling for a disconnection between the two. Guided by such cognition, the Turkish government took the collapse of the Ottoman Empire as a lesson and strongly opposed any attempt by external forces to undermine Türkiye’s territory and sovereignty and ethnic separatism; drew inspiration from European nationalism to shape a new “Turkish nation” and a modern, unified, and united nation-state; guarded against and suppressed pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism that transcend ethnic and national borders by restricting and censoring their followers; and kept a distance from the historical territories of the Ottoman Empire including the Middle East and North Africa through a non-interference and non-intervention policy.

By contrast, conservatives and political Islamists represented by Erdoğan have a positive attitude toward the Ottoman Empire, viewing the Turkish Republic as a “successor” to the empire and vowing to restore its glory and return to the center stage of the region. Toward this end, Erdoğan and his AKP government have been vigorously expanding influence in Central Asia, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans, which used to come under Ottoman dominion. By stressing the so-called historical responsibilities, the AKP government has striven to expand the post-Ottoman space as the principal direction toward increased strategic depth and security

¹ Dorothee Schmid, “Turkey: The Sèvres Syndrome, or the Interminable War,” *Politique étrangère*, No. 1 (2014): 199–213.

barriers for Türkiye. It has been deeply involved in the Syrian crisis, the Libyan civil war, the rift between members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Palestine–Israel conflict, and the Nagorno–Karabakh War, deeming these as critical issues related to Türkiye’s core security interests. Moreover, the AKP government has held high the banners of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism in a bid to be the “leader of the Islamic and Turkic world,” meddling in Islam-related or Turks-related affairs worldwide. During Erdoğan’s reign, neo-Ottomanism emerged, and Türkiye’s national strategy has become increasingly expansionist, pushing the boundaries of its security and interests further to the outside world.

C. An enterprising strategy in response to geopolitical realities

Türkiye is located between several important plates directly affecting the world’s geopolitical balance: namely, the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. It faces Russia and East Europe across the Black Sea and is adjacent to South Europe and North Africa around the Mediterranean. It is not far away from the Caspian Basin, which is rich in oil and gas resources, the Persian Gulf, which is known as the world’s energy artery, and the Suez Canal, a vital channel connecting the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Its radiation effect on the international political and economic landscape is unmatched. It holds the southern gateway to Europe and controls the only passage connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. It lies between the Christian and Islamic civilizations and, due to its enormous strategic value, has always been hotly contested by global major powers. Nevertheless, over the years, Türkiye has been faced with highly uncertain security threats, requiring constant vigilance against and timely response to spillover risks from its neighbors.

Since the 20th century, Türkiye has long been at the forefront of international conflicts. Around World War I, European powers such as Britain, Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary competed fiercely over Ottoman territories, especially those on the Balkan Peninsula, eroding the empire’s interests and forcing it to enter the war for self-protection. During most of World War II, Türkiye stayed neutral, seeking a balance between Britain and the US on one side, the Soviet Union on the second, and Germany and Italy on the third. It tried all it could not to offend any major power, but staying aloof proved impossible because of its geostrategic position. The Allies and

the Axis powers vied to woo the Turkish Republic, which finally declared war on Germany and Japan but did not avoid a deterioration of relations with the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, Türkiye served as a “bridgehead” of the US-led West to resist the southward expansion of the Soviet Union and successively joined NATO and the Central Treaty Organization, allowing NATO to deploy troops and missile systems targeting the Soviet Union on its territory. The main theatres of the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War, which erupted after the Cold War, were both in Türkiye’s vicinity. Türkiye firmly supported the West in the Gulf War but refused to cooperate with the US military policy aimed at overthrowing Saddam Hussein in the Iraq War. In neither way has Türkiye managed to stop the autonomy process of the Kurdish-populated part of northern Iraq, or block the stimulus and catalytic effects of regional situations on its domestic ethnic separatism, suffering heavy blows to its national security. In 2011, the Arab Spring triggered turmoil across the region. As an aftermath of the Syrian civil war, millions of refugees flooded into Türkiye. The year 2014 witnessed the rise of the terrorist group Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, with jihadists smuggling weapons and recruiting soldiers on the Türkiye–Syria border, extremism making its way into Türkiye, and terror attacks occurring frequently. In 2020, the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict escalated, involving Türkiye’s ally Azerbaijan and its “old foe” Armenia, which broke the strategic balance on Türkiye’s northeastern border and disrupted its strategic passages to Central Asia and the Caspian Sea. Then, in 2022, the Ukraine crisis broke out, pushing up global commodity prices and undermining stability in the Black Sea. This crisis has worsened rampant inflation in Türkiye and posed serious challenges to its relations with NATO.

The highly uncertain geopolitical environment and frequently occurring external risks have resulted in vulnerable security for Türkiye, accompanied by a common lack of sense of security and lasting society-wide attention on security issues. As a result, the country has adopted an enterprising security strategy. Influenced by historical experience, Turkish policymakers usually will not sit back passively in the face of security risks. Rather, they are inclined to control the spread of risks and resolve threats beyond the border through diplomatic efforts, alliance guarantees, or military operations. At the practical level, a proactive, enterprising government stance on security issues is easily

backed by the public and constitutes the “maximum common denominator” between the interests of different political parties. Atatürk’s “embrace of the West” and Erdoğan’s “look to the East and the South” seem poles apart but are both responses to shifting geopolitics, intended to allocate strategic resources dynamically to address the most challenging risks and foster a relatively benign security environment. Ahmet Davutoğlu, former Prime Minister of Türkiye and leader of the AKP, stressed in his book *Strategic Depth: Turkey’s International Position* that Türkiye is located at the center of several geographical regions that can play an influential role; therefore, it should adopt a positive, multi-directional, and multi-dimensional strategy and seek to become a “central power.” This assertion elucidated the enterprising strategy of Türkiye.

Meanwhile, Türkiye’s definitions of security and security strategy are becoming increasingly wide, staying highly alert to “hard” security risks such as traditional geopolitical conflicts and paying great heed to “soft” ones such as the regional proliferation of WMDs, flows of refugees, and structural changes in energy markets; emphasizing the importance of preserving homeland security and stability through military hard power and stressing the need to influence and shape the peripheral security environment with the help of diplomacy and other soft powers. Recent years have witnessed strong volatility in the international landscape and a turbulent restructuring of Türkiye’s geopolitical environment, rendering its security strategy even more enterprising. Türkiye not only sees itself as a “regional key country” but also proactively takes up the role of a “regional security provider.” Fighting radical extremist groups in the Middle East, balancing Shiite influence in the region, preventing the Kurds from establishing an independent state, countering Russia in the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Levant region, and filling the power vacuum left by the US and European strategic contraction in the Middle East have all been included in the country’s broader security policy framework. In the middle of the 1990s, Sükrü Elekdag, a senior Turkish diplomat, advised the Turkish government to develop a defense strategy, capable of winning war on two-and-a-half fronts, i.e., conducting two full-scale operations simultaneously along the Aegean and southern fronts while at the same time being prepared for a “half war” against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).¹ Such a mindset

¹ Sükrü Elekdag, “2 and 1/2 War Strategy,” <https://sam.gov.tr/pdf/perceptions/Volume-1/match-may-1996/SukruElekdag.pdf>.

that defuses and addresses risks, external and internal, in an omnidirectional, multidimensional, and multipronged manner is still influencing Türkiye's security strategy.

III. Key Practices of Turkish National Security Strategy

Established a century ago, the Republic of Türkiye has now embarked on a new development stage. Domestically, Erdoğan and his AKP remain in power, continuing to dominate the country's power and the keynote of its policies; with the rise of nationalism, nationalists are increasingly mainstreaming Turkish society. Internationally, policy adjustments by major global powers, especially the US and Russia, have given Türkiye more autonomous space. The restructuring geopolitical landscape in Eurasia has altered the traditional security environment facing Türkiye. Accordingly, Türkiye has adopted an increasingly expansionary and enterprising national security strategy, trying to seek a new balance between its diverse identities and between the East and the West. During this period, Türkiye's practice of preserving national security is primarily focused on three goals, i.e., maintaining territorial integrity, pursuing autonomy in defense, and expanding strategic room.

A. Maintaining territorial integrity: long-held bottom line

Kurdish separatism, as represented by the PKK, is the top threat to Türkiye's national security, menacing its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and social stability. This issue is extremely sensitive and difficult to resolve, highly susceptible to the policies or situations of neighboring countries, such as Syria, Iran, and Iraq, and is termed by some as Türkiye's "Achilles' heel."¹ Over the years, successive governments of Türkiye have applied a policy of tough crackdown against the PKK. To facilitate Türkiye's EU accession negotiations, Erdoğan initiated the Turkish–Kurdish peace process in 2012, which proved short-lived and collapsed in 2015. In recent years, the AKP government has fully mobilized political, military, and diplomatic means to combat Kurdish separatists.

Politically, the AKP government has classified ethnic separatists as "terrorists."

¹ Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Kurdish Achilles' Heel," September 15, 2011, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/turkeys-kurdish-achilles-heel-5851>.

(i) Treating armed separatist groups such as the PKK and their supporters differently from radical Kurdish nationalists and moderate Kurdish groups. By doing so, the AKP government aims to avoid an unlimited expansion of its counterterrorism actions targeting the PKK and win as much as possible Kurdish support for its policies and a unified country. (ii) Cracking down on the political proxies of Kurdish nationalism. The AKP government has expelled the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) from the TBMM through means such as revising laws and diverting voters. Selahattin Demirtaş, then chairman of the HDP, was prosecuted for "terrorism-related offenses." Moreover, the activities of pro-Kurdish political parties have been restricted or suppressed. (iii) Eliminating the protective umbrellas for Kurdish separatism. From 2015 onward, the AKP government has successively removed, prosecuted, or even detained dozens of mayors allegedly linked to the HDP or PKK and replaced them with officials loyal to the AKP and Erdoğan. These replacements primarily happened in the Kurds-populated southeastern part of Türkiye. They aimed to eradicate the Petri dishes and protective umbrellas for ethnic separatism by disabling these mayors from taking advantage of their posts to promote policies that favor a rejuvenation of Kurdish culture and strengthen the quest for autonomy in the Kurdish regions.

Militarily, the AKP government has launched a chain of crackdowns. The Turkish government has long implemented martial law and curfews in the southeastern part of the country where Kurds form the predominant ethnic group, imposing strict controls on social activities and human flows there to prevent attacks against Turkish security forces and government employees. Additionally, the AKP government has stepped up military crackdowns on the PKK. Since 2015, the TSK has managed to expel the main force of the PKK to the Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq and persistently launched counterterrorism operations across the border. Furthermore, Türkiye has extended its military crackdowns to northern Syria, accusing the Kurdish armed forces there of being an offshoot of the PKK, infiltrated and controlled by the organization. Through Operation Euphrates Shield of 2016, Operation Olive Branch of 2018, and Operation Peace Spring of 2019, the TSK has suppressed the Kurdish forces' sphere of effective control in Syria. Meanwhile, Türkiye has created a 30-kilometer "security zone" in northern Syria along the Türkiye–Syria border, where nearly 10,000 Turkish

troops are stationed. In northern Iraq, the TSK conducted Operation Claw in 2019, Operations Claw-Eagle and Claw-Tiger in 2020, Operations Claw-Lightning and Claw-Thunderbolt in 2021, and Operation Claw-Lock in 2022, during which it struck the PKK's military bases by coordinating the air-ground battle. Furthermore, the TSK has utilized drones and precision-guided munitions to kill higher-level PKK cadres and commanders, undermined the PKK's strategic plan of fighting guerrilla warfare under the natural protection of the mountains, and weakened the PKK's organization and combat capabilities. It is estimated that as of early 2022, Türkiye had "2,000–3,000 troops stationed at around 40 outposts in northern Iraq" near the Türkiye–Iraq border.¹

Diplomatically, the AKP government has been vigorously seeking cooperation and support from the countries concerned. The Turkish government has leveraged the transnational nature of Kurdish separatism and discussed cooperation with neighboring countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Iran that face the same threats to squeeze the space for Kurdish separatist activities; improved relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq via energy and transportation cooperation and enticed it to back Turkish stances concerning the PKK, thus sowing discord among Kurdish groups in the region; participated in cooperation such as combating the IS, promoting peace talks on Syria, and intervening in the Libyan civil war in exchange for the practical support of major global powers, especially the US and Russia, on the issue of Kurdish forces (for example, reducing their assistance to Kurdish forces in Syria and greenlighting Turkish airstrikes in Iraq and Syria). Moreover, the Turkish government has used every opportunity to win international recognition of the legitimacy of its Kurdish policy. For instance, during the Ukraine crisis, the AKP government demanded that Finland and Sweden fully cooperate in cracking down on the PKK and its affiliates, ceasing support for the PKK and Kurdish forces in Syria, and allowing weapons export to Türkiye, among other conditions for Türkiye not to veto their NATO membership.²

B. Autonomy in defense: direction of adjustment

Traditionally, Türkiye's defense security was underpinned by two pillars:

¹ Berkay Mandiracı, "Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Regional Battleground in Flux," February 18, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkeys-pkk-conflict-regional-battleground-flux>.

² Magnus Norell, "NATO Membership for Sweden: Between Turkey and the Kurds," June 27, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nato-membership-sweden-between-turkey-and-kurds>.

the US-led collective defense system of NATO and the modernization and indigenization of Turkish defense capabilities. However, with the US adjusting its global strategies and shifting focus toward the “Indo-Pacific,” US allies in the Middle East, including Türkiye, are losing confidence in its security commitments. Under the leadership of Erdoğan and the AKP, Türkiye has experienced profound transformations in its relations with the West, accompanied by a growing divergence of interests. For example, the Türkiye–US relations were soured by issues such as Kurdish forces and the Gülen movement;¹ Türkiye and Greece collided in the eastern Mediterranean over resource disputes; Türkiye’s pan-Islamist foreign policy has caused discord with France and Germany. All these instances have inevitably weakened Türkiye’s alliance ties with NATO. Under such circumstances, despite retaining the “dual pillars” of its security policy, Türkiye has increasingly prioritized the development of independent defense industries and autonomous military defense capabilities. This adjustment process has an internal logic consistent with those behind Türkiye’s shift in identity perception from a “European power” to a “central power” and the return of its foreign strategy from “embracing the West” to “achieving a pluralistic equilibrium.”

Believing that a well-developed, full-fledged defense system and strong, independent defense production constitute the basis for safeguarding a country’s security and interests, Türkiye has placed great emphasis on the development of its defense industry. This can be attributed to historical factors as well as to practical reasons. Since the 1960s, the US and Europe have imposed multiple arms embargoes on Türkiye because of the issues of Cyprus and Kurds, gradually banishing Türkiye’s blind faith in the “NATO defense market” and forcing it to realize the importance of an independent defense industry for national security.² After Erdoğan came to power, Turkish security and foreign policy became increasingly independent and tough, requiring the

¹ In July 2016, a failed coup attempt took place in Türkiye, which Erdoğan said was planned by Fethullah Gülen, an Islamic cleric and leader of the Gülen movement exiled in the US. The US government repeatedly turned down Türkiye’s Gülen extradition requests. “The West’s ambiguous response to the July 2016 coup attempt and the NATO ties with some of the putschists have eroded Turkey’s trust in alliance ties so irrevocably that Ankara perceives the real threat to emanate not from the south but from the West.” Selin Nası, “Is the ‘2.5 War Strategy’ Making a Comeback?,” February 16, 2018, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/selin-nasi/is-the-2-5-war-strategy-making-a-comeback-127382>.

² Merve Seren Yeşiltaş, “A Brief History of 100 Years of the Turkish Defense Industry,” November 6, 2023, <https://politicstoday.org/a-brief-history-of-100-years-of-the-turkish-defense-industry/>.

support of corresponding military strengths and the defense industry. Over the past decade, Türkiye has achieved great progress in building an independent defense industry thanks to the vigorous support and guidance of its government. (i) Türkiye has possessed relatively strong research and development (R&D) and manufacturing capabilities. Presently, Türkiye has hundreds of industrial enterprises and research institutions in the defense sector, seven of which have been thus far listed in the world's Top 100 Defense Companies,¹ covering such fields as dual-use communication systems, electronic warfare, optoelectronic control systems, drones and unmanned vehicles, missiles, and space-based radar technology. Türkiye's domestically-produced TCG Anadolu, claimed as the world's first drone carrier, was formally commissioned in April 2023. Türkiye has also announced plans to build a second aircraft carrier, the TCG Trakya. (ii) Türkiye has largely accomplished the goal of indigenizing its arms industry. The Turkish government has introduced a "national technology initiative," pouring \$60 billion a year into its defense industry to replace foreign procurement with domestic R&D and reduce dependence on US and European military suppliers. The private defense industry grew from \$1 billion in 2002 to \$11 billion in 2020.² Turkish companies supplied only 20% of the army's military equipment in 2004; the figure rose to a whopping 80% in 2022.³ (iii) Türkiye has become a leading exporter of major arms. Self-sufficiency in arms has not only made Türkiye well-positioned in foreign relations and national defense but also rendered it a "new star" in global arms exports. Türkiye's share of global arms exports rose from 0.6% in 2013–2017 to 1.1% in 2018–2022, representing a 69% increase, whereas its share of global arms imports decreased by 49% during the same period. Thus, Türkiye ranked the 12th largest exporter of major arms in the world.⁴ Turkish export of drones,

¹ The Top 100 Defense Companies List 2020 had seven Turkish companies. In 2022, the number decreased to three: Aselsan (49th), Turkish Aerospace Industries (67th), and Roketsan (86th). Ibrahim Karatas, "Tanks, Drones, Jets: How Türkiye's Defence Industry Became a Global Force," March 28, 2023, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/tanks-drones-jets-how-turkiyes-defence-industry-became-a-global-force-12798372>.

² Jared Malsin, "Drones, Unmanned Boats and Killer Robots Have Made Turkey an Arms-Industry Powerhouse," July 21, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/drones-unmanned-boats-and-killer-robots-have-made-turkey-an-arms-industry-powerhouse-11658404887>.

³ "Tanks, Drones, Jets: How Türkiye's Defence Industry Became a Global Force."

⁴ Pieter D. Wezeman, Justine Gadon, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022," March 2023, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf.

in particular, has been used by its government as a significant diplomatic tool for expanding influence in the Persian Gulf, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia.

While pursuing autonomy of defense in the first place, Türkiye is not going to give up the tangible benefits brought about by its NATO membership, especially the “nuclear umbrella” it acquires. Erdoğan’s government, in particular, has been striving to strengthen Türkiye’s external security guarantee by elevating the country’s role in NATO. On the one hand, Türkiye has been widely participating in NATO’s military cooperation. Currently, the TSK is the second largest standing military force in NATO, after the US Armed Forces; the Allied Land Command is based in Izmir, the third largest city in Türkiye; the Incirlik and Konya Airbases are open to NATO, where NATO has been authorized to store a small number of tactical nuclear weapons; the Kürecik Radar Station adjacent to the Iranian border has been part of NATO’s missile defense system. Moreover, the Turkish government has described itself as a strategic ally of the US and Europe, endorsing NATO’s expansion, advocating for a fair share of risks among NATO allies, and pledging “appropriate support” for NATO operations.¹ From 2002 to 2021, the TSK widely participated in NATO’s military operations in the Mediterranean, Syria, Afghanistan, the Balkans, and the Horn of Africa. After the US and NATO troops left Afghanistan, Türkiye offered to deal with the aftermath of the withdrawal. On the other hand, Türkiye has been actively promoting the transformation of NATO, calling for reforms of NATO’s command and decision-making mechanisms, crisis response procedures, and standards for identifying security challenges while retaining its function of collective defense. Türkiye’s core objectives include: winning NATO allies’ attention on Türkiye’s specific security needs and their recognition of Türkiye’s unique security perceptions, hoping that NATO will play its role in a way favorable for Türkiye in key regions such as the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and the Balkans; and increasing Türkiye’s say in NATO, supporting the transformation of NATO from a “European self-defense alliance” toward a “global security actor,” to better serve Türkiye’s strategic goal to become a “central power.”

¹ “Türkiye’s Relations with NATO,” Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/nato.en.mfa>.

C. Broader strategic room: long-term aspiration

Under Erdoğan's leadership, the Turkish economy has achieved leapfrog development and its composite national strength has significantly increased, providing material support for an expansionary national security strategy. During this period, the Turkish government has rectified the previous strategic perspective solely focused on domestic security and made expanding the international strategic room a long-term objective, stepping up efforts toward this end from both land and sea.

On land, Türkiye has striven to address its security challenges and shape its geo-strategic room through such means as deploying military assets in its periphery and enhancing its long-range combat capabilities. (i) Building military bases overseas. In 1974, Türkiye deployed 30,000 troops in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (which has not yet been recognized internationally) amidst the division of Cyprus, the first time that the TSK had been stationed abroad. Since coming to power, the AKP government has sped up its pace of building military bases overseas, viewing this as a necessary condition for preserving national security. Presently, Türkiye has approximately 5,000 naval, air, and special forces stationed in Qatar, primarily to guard against conservative Gulf monarchies hostile to political Islam, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; set up outposts and intelligence stations in Iraq and Syria to facilitate the combat against Kurdish forces; established military training camps in Somalia, with 2,000 Turkish troops stationed there to assist the local army in combating extremists; and built observation bases in Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh as a bridgehead for projecting Turkish military strengths toward Transcaucasia and Central Asia. (ii) Expanding international defense cooperation. Türkiye signed a military cooperation agreement with the Omar al-Bashir government in 2017, which allowed it to construct a naval dock to maintain vessels in the Sudanese port city of Suakin but was later shelved by a coup in Sudan; reached a consensus with Chad in 2019, agreeing to provide military personnel training for the latter; signed the Shusha Declaration with Azerbaijan in 2021, which pledged to support each other in case of "threat or attack by a third country"; and signed an intelligence protocol with Kazakhstan in 2022, cooperating on monitoring the development of regional military and political situations that pose threats to the security of both countries. (iii)

Engaging in overseas military operations. Türkiye has been deeply involved in regional hotspots of conflict ranging from the Syrian to the Libyan civil war, supporting proxy armed forces locally by providing intelligence, military training, weaponry, and equipment; actively participated in multilateral peace-keeping operations under the framework of the United Nations (UN), deploying hundreds of military and police forces in Lebanon, Mali, the Central African Republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo.¹ As of early 2021, more than 14% of Turkish soldiers were on duty beyond the borders,² primarily in “strategic priority” regions, namely, Türkiye’s neighboring countries, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Horn of Africa, which by and large overlap with the previous sphere of influence of the Ottoman Empire.

On sea, Türkiye has increasingly viewed maritime security as a significant, inalienable strategic and economic interest, accelerating the modernization of its naval forces in a bid to reach “levels that can rival the incumbent global powers.” Two factors are driving this ambition. (i) To break free from the limitations of historical treaties on Türkiye’s strategic room. The Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923 recognized the boundaries of the modern state of Türkiye but also encumbered its claim to Aegean islands, which provisioned that all the islands and islets in the Aegean Sea beyond three miles (approximately 4.83 kilometers) from the Turkish shores were ceded to Greece, exceeding 90% of the total number. These islands are mostly far away from mainland Greece and adjacent to the Turkish coast, blocking Türkiye’s access to the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. As Türkiye grows in strength, so does its demand for strategic room and its desire to “break through” from the sea. (ii) To expand national interests by claiming maritime rights. Since significant oil and gas discoveries were made on the Aegean seabed in the 1970s, Türkiye has argued that “the Aegean is a common sea between Türkiye and Greece,” advocating for equal rights between both countries, which were turned down by Greece.

¹ Rich Outzen, “Turkey’s Global Military Footprint in 2022,” December 22, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/turkeys-global-military-footprint-in-2022/>.

² Ali Kemal Erdem, “One in Every Seven Soldiers Is beyond the Borders: TSK’s Strength Abroad Exceeds 50 Thousand,” February 16, 2021, <https://www.indyturk.com/node/316736/her-yedi-askerden-biri-s%C4%B1n%C4%B1rlar%C4%B1n-%C3%B6tesinde-tskn%C4%B1n-yurtd%C4%B1%C5%9F%C4%B1ndaki-g%C3%BC-c%C3%BC-50-bini-a%C5%9F%C4%B1>.

Thereafter, conflicts between the two countries have persisted surrounding the delimitation of the continental shelf and the demilitarization of Aegean islands close to Türkiye's mainland. Entering the 21st century, with the advancement of exploration technology, large natural gas reserves have been discovered in the eastern Mediterranean, arousing fierce competition from regional countries, from which Türkiye has once again been excluded. To change the situation, Türkiye urgently needs to build its naval forces for the sake of more maritime rights and freedom of action.

Following a proactive, enterprising maritime policy, the AKP has emphasized the role of the ocean in Türkiye's development, vowing to project influence to the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, the eastern Mediterranean, the Caspian Sea, and the Persian Gulf. It believes that a union of all the straits and maritime channels controlled by Islamic countries will "change the world" and that Türkiye should play a critical role in this process. In 2006, Admiral Cem Gürdeniz proposed the concept of Mavi Vatan (Blue Homeland), extending the boundaries of a "country" from land to ocean. This concept calls on Türkiye to defend its coasts and straits, seize a favorable position on the high seas, pursue control over critical sea routes, and ensure maritime security and core national interests such as resources and minerals. This concept is consistent with the visions and propositions of the AKP's maritime policy and is also supported by the Republican People's Party, Türkiye's main opposition force.¹ Now, Mavi Vatan has become a core concept in Türkiye's maritime security strategy. Guided by such a vision, the Turkish government has refused to accept the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea but contrarily demanded a re-delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Aegean Sea and the eastern Mediterranean, an expansion of its Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), and an assurance of its entry and exit channels to the high seas and its rights to explore and develop energy. In February 2019, a large naval exercise was organized for the first time in Türkiye's three coastal seas (the Black, the Aegean, and the eastern Mediterranean Seas), taking the name "Mavi Vatan" and extending over 462,000 km². In November 2019, the Turkish government

¹ Aurélien Denizeau, "Mavi Vatan, the 'Blue Homeland': The Origins, Influences and Limits of an Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey," April 2021, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/mavi-vatan-blue-homeland-origins-influences-and-limits-ambitious>.

signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean with Libya's Government of National Accord, ignoring the maritime claims by Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt and extending Türkiye's EEZs to Libya's vicinity, which marked a substantial step in Türkiye's expansion at sea. Following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2022, Türkiye ramped up its presence at the Black Sea. In 2023, Erdoğan declared a new development vision—the Century of Türkiye, of which maritime rights and the freedom of maritime movement are integral parts. The new Minister of National Defense Yaşar Güler has also vowed to modernize Türkiye's naval forces to “ensure peace and security in the Blue Homeland.”

By reviewing the evolution of Türkiye's security perceptions and mechanisms from the Atatürk to Erdoğan eras, we can observe that the Turkish national security strategy has been shaped by both static and dynamic factors. The static factors have been the country's historical memory and geopolitical environment; in dynamic terms, its diverse identity. Corresponding to different perceptions of identity, the Turkish government's assessment of national security risks and policy means to ensure national security have varied greatly. It should be noted, however, that Türkiye's diverse identity will present different faces in different historical periods; these faces will not disappear, because every one of them is an indispensable part of the country. Therefore, a permanent and complete Eastern or Western tilt will be impossible for Türkiye. Conversely, it will strive to seek a flexible balance between its differentiated perceptions of identity and generalized national interests. Given the current context of intensifying major-country competition and a resurgence of bloc confrontation, Türkiye has become a “key swing state” in the eyes of the US-led West due to its unique security perceptions and independent security strategy.¹ Positively speaking, as the middle powers, which include Türkiye, pursue strategic autonomy, they may emerge as new intermediate forces against the fragmentation of the international community.

¹ Cliff Kupchan, “6 Swing States Will Decide the Future of Geopolitics,” June 6, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/06/geopolitics-global-south-middle-powers-swing-states-india-brazil-turkey-indonesia-saudi-arabia-south-africa/>.