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## The Five Phases of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the AKP

### INTRODUCTION

Once described as stable and predictable, Turkey's foreign policy has turned increasingly inconsistent and unpredictable under successive Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) governments. Since the first AKP single-party government took office in late 2002, Turkey's relationship with each of the following has veered from exceptional cooperation to historic crises verging on (if not actually plunging into) hostility, often in quick succession: the United States, the European Union, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Egypt, and Greece. Scholars studying Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP have referred to "paradigm shifts" (Sözen 2010), multiple "shifts of axis" (Cornell 2012), frequent "twists and turns" (Cop and Zihnioğlu 2017), and "dramatic fluctuations" (İşıksal and Göksel 2018).

How are we to make sense of these frequent and seemingly contradictory transformations? Are they products of specific actors' choices at critical junctures, or the inevitable outcome of being a "medium power" (Oran 2005) sitting on multiple fault lines and undergoing major structural shifts? Have Turkey's responses to the changes in the international system been primarily driven by the Islamist ideology of its decision makers or pragmatic calculations of interest maximization (Kirişçi 2009)? Any attempt to answer these questions by pointing to a single causal factor will inevitably fall short of a

satisfactory explanation. The role of human agency and structural factors, domestic and international dynamics, ideology, and pragmatism all partially contribute to our understanding of the puzzle. This calls for a comprehensive framework that can integrate multiple determinants playing out on different levels and explain divergent, even contradictory, outputs across an extended time period.

Hudson (2005) defines foreign policy analysis (FPA) as a “necessarily inter/multidisciplinary” and “radically integrative” subfield of international relations (IR), which views foreign policy decision-making as a “multi-factoral” process that should be examined on “multiple levels of analysis.” A key strength of FPA, which distinguishes it from other IR theories, is its willingness to explore the intersections of domestic and international politics, i.e. the “two-level game” (Putnam 1988), material and ideational determinants of state behavior, as well as structure and agency. In this spirit, I examine Turkey’s foreign policy behavior as the outcome of a dynamic and interactive process between multiple layers of analysis that move from micro (agent-based/domestic) to macro (structure-based/international) in focus. These are, namely, the party, the coalition, the state, and the international environment.

*The party* refers to the internal makeup of the ruling party, changes in leadership cadres, and the ideas, worldviews, and political agendas promoted by key government figures. *The coalition* entails the socioeconomic and political alliances, formal and informal coalitions that the ruling party forms with external actors and interest groups, both at home and abroad. *The state* refers to the institutional architecture and role divisions that shape foreign policy within the state apparatus. Finally, *the international environment* focuses on key regional and/or global socioeconomic, geopolitical, and ideational events, trends, and dynamics that characterize a certain era. Turkey’s foreign policy behavior in a given period can be understood by examining (a) who is in charge of the ruling party, (b) the interests and composition of the governing coalition, (c) the balance of powers within key state institutions, and (d) prevalent international dynamics. Signifi-

cant changes in one or more of these levels, in turn, help explain the twists and turns in Turkey's foreign policy.

### **TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY MAKING BEFORE THE AKP**

Turkey's foreign policy during much of the twentieth century has been variably described as "consistent," "predictable," "passive," "balanced," "traditionalist," or "non-adventurous" (Davutoğlu 1997; Oran 2005; Öniş and Yılmaz 2009; Özdal et al. 2011; Hale 2013). This characterization was largely a result of two stabilizing factors at the levels of the international environment and the state. First, throughout the Cold War, Turkey's position as a NATO member on the East/West divide predicated its foreign policy on the structural confinements of the bipolar world and limited the space for independent action to its decision makers. Secondly, with their institutional roots in the Ottoman Empire, the military and the foreign service bureaucracy constituted the backbone of the Turkish state and played a dominant role in the making of foreign policy since the republic's foundation.

The National Security Council (NSC), a product of the 1960 coup, determines the main contours of Turkey's foreign policy. Until it was restructured to give civilian members more power in 2003, the military high command held greater sway over the NSC's decisions than elected officials. Elected governments' ability to shape foreign policy was further constrained by the highly professionalized foreign service bureaucracy, which worked as a "safety valve" against "undesirable" popular currents, while maintaining the established path in Turkey's foreign relations (Özdal et al. 2011, 67–68).

The dominance of the military-bureaucratic establishment over Turkey's foreign policy began to be challenged in the 1980s. As Turkey transitioned to a free market economy, the interests of the business community, especially those represented by the leading business association, TÜSIAD, increasingly weighed in on foreign policy decision-making. The period also saw the rise of prime-minister-turned-president Turgut Özal, a popular conservative politician and the architect

of Turkey's neoliberal turn, who publicly challenged senior generals on strategic issues, such as whether to participate in the US-led war against Saddam Hussein in 1991. On the whole, however, these actors operated within the boundaries set by the NSC and did not seek to fundamentally reshape Turkey's international orientation.

The end of the Cold War did not bring an immediate end to this tutelary control. During the 1990s, Turkey's domestic and foreign policy reflected the guardians' evolving national security perception, which shifted its focus from the threat of communism to Kurdish separatism and political Islam. In 1996, when the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP) became the first Islamist party to lead a coalition government, the guardians saw this as a threat not only to the regime's secular character but also to its pro-Western orientation, and toppled it in a bloodless coup in February 1997, with the backing of Turkey's Western allies, the United States and the European Union.

At the turn of the millennium, a series of high-level corruption scandals, chronic economic failures, and a devastating earthquake in 1999 ushered in a shift of popular and political focus from the military's security-driven agenda towards a civilian-led agenda of democratization, normalization of bilateral regional ties, and the pursuit of European Union membership. It was on this wave of societal discontent and demand for political change that the AKP, founded in 2001 by a younger generation of Islamist politicians that split from the senior cadres of the outlawed RP, entered into government in November 2002.

## **FIVE PHASES OF FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE AKP**

### **Europeanization (2002–2007)**

The AKP managed to form Turkey's first single-party government since the late 1980s, but as the successor to the Islamist movement in the tradition of the RP, whose followers were purged from the state apparatus after the 1997 coup, it lacked meaningful institutional presence. The AKP, in other words, was in government but not truly in power.

This institutional fragility is critical to explaining the party's highly pragmatic choice of alliances and foreign policy decisions in this first period. Facing a distrustful military and senior bureaucracy, the party forged a coalition of convenience with two groups at home: first, a small but vocal liberal intelligentsia that helped rebrand the party and promote it to skeptical audiences as "conservative democrats" and pro-EU reformers; and second, the Hizmet ("Service") Movement of Fethullah Gülen, a US-based Muslim preacher with an expanding transnational network of schools, businesses, and media organizations (Fitzgerald 2017). The alliance with the Gülenists was crucial not only in terms of the movement's financial and media support for the government, but also for its cadres within the state, in particular the police force and the judiciary, which had grown steadily under successive center-right governments since the 1980s.

Despite their historical differences and conflicting visions for Turkey, these three groups came together on the basis of their shared opposition to the military's tutelage and support for the EU accession process. For the AKP, abandoning the anti-Westernism of its predecessors for Europeanization was the most pragmatic foreign policy choice in this period: the EU was expanding and at the height of its confidence. The accession process was widely popular in Turkey, consistently scoring above 50 percent in opinion polls in the early 2000s. Pursuing the EU reforms gave the AKP credibility beyond its core base at home, as well as among Western governments and financial markets, accelerating Turkey's economic recovery at a time of a global liquidity boom. Finally, with its emphasis on democratization, the accession process enabled the governing coalition to start undoing the military's control over the state apparatus, all the while justifiably claiming not to stray from Turkey's long-standing pro-Western path (Müftüler Baç 2005). As the Islamists appeared to embrace the West, members of Turkey's secular nationalist elite increasingly turned away from the republic's traditional pro-Western position to advocate an anti-Atlanticist alliance with Russia, China, and Iran, known as Eurasianism.<sup>1</sup>

The AKP's pro-Western stance in this period was not limited to the EU; it also included maintaining strategic ties with the United States and Israel, despite both being ideological archenemies of Turkish Islamists. The contradictions of this ultra-pragmatic turn were managed through an unofficial division of labor inside the party: foreign policy was handled by a group of diplomatic-minded senior politicians and technocrats, led by Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül (2003–2007) and Economy Minister Ali Babacan (2002–2007), while the popular and charismatic Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2003–2014) was in charge of domestic affairs. When foreign and domestic spheres overlapped, as they often did, the party leadership was flexible enough to produce effective policy responses through coordination among senior figures.

The AKP's pro-Western stance was reciprocated with support from Turkey's traditional Western allies for the government. For the liberal intelligentsia in Turkey and Europe, the AKP represented the agent of a potentially historic reconciliation between Islam and Europe through liberal democratization. Similarly, the George W. Bush administration promoted Turkey under the AKP as the "moderate" antidote to radical Islam in the US-led "war on terror." In a display of shifting alliances, a decade after the 1997 coup, both the EU and the United States came out in support of the elected government when it was threatened with military intervention in April 2007 for presenting Abdullah Gül as its candidate for the presidency against the generals' wishes.

### **Autonomization (2007–2011)**

"Autonomization" represents the period when the ruling party grew politically and institutionally confident to confront the military at home, and set out to fill the geopolitical vacuum left in the region by a Europe in crisis and a United States in retreat. Having survived the military's ultimatum in 2007, the AKP went on to win a second general election victory, secure Gül's election as president, and successfully amend the Constitution in a referendum to elect future presidents via

popular vote. After narrowly escaping closure by the Constitutional Court for anti-secular activities, the party put its weight behind two highly politicized court cases against alleged coup plotters in 2008 and 2010.

Driven by Gülenist prosecutors, police officers, and newspapers, these cases involved large-scale detention and purges of secular nationalist and Eurasianist opponents of the governing coalition within the military, state bureaucracy, and civil society, based on partly fabricated charges (Jenkins 2013). In September 2010, the AKP secured another victory in a constitutional referendum to restructure the judiciary and give the legislative and executive branches more power over the appointment of judges and prosecutors. The mass incarcerations and the constitutional changes enabled the government to extend its control over the state apparatus by filling the vacancies with its allies, including many Gülenists.

The end of Turkey's "European moment" came as a result of the popular backlash against the prospect of Turkish membership in Europe, followed by the economic crisis in 2008 that saw an internally conflicted EU turn increasingly insular. Meanwhile, the election of Barack Obama as the US president ushered in a period of American reluctance to directly intervene abroad. In this environment of Western withdrawal, the AKP's newfound confidence at home found space to be translated into an activist foreign policy in its non-Western neighborhoods.

This was still a period of pragmatism, as Turkish foreign policy turned increasingly multilateral and autonomous, but not necessarily anti-Western, nor quite the "axis shift" that US critics of the Turkish government claimed (Cagaptay 2009; Schenker 2009). The government invested in improving its historically strained ties with Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Russia, and launched (ultimately failed) initiatives to resume diplomatic relations with Armenia and resolve Turkey's long-standing conflict with its Kurdish minority. Its "soft power" based multilateral foreign policy bore fruit when Turkey won a rotating seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2009–2010.

However, the role of ideology, and the Islamist worldview of Turkey's decision makers, did start becoming more visible, especially in a series of escalating crises with Israel, which included Prime Minister Erdoğan storming out of a panel with Israeli President Simon Peres in Davos in 2009, and a fatal Israeli raid on a Turkish-led humanitarian aid flotilla aimed at breaking the blockade of Gaza in 2010. Whether in protest of the plight of Palestinians or that of Uighur Turks in China, or in defense of genocidal Muslim rulers, such as Omar al-Bashar of Sudan, Turkey became an increasingly outspoken champion of the "Muslim cause" in international politics.

With his combative style and unscripted interventions, Erdoğan started leaving a personal mark on foreign policy. But the period primarily bore the hallmarks of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's (2009–2014) revisionism, which became commonly known as "neo-Ottomanism" for its thinly concealed neo-imperialist ambitions. The former international relations professor saw Turkey not as a peripheral actor pleading for acceptance by the West but as an "order setting agent" embracing its Islamic imperial heritage in the former Ottoman territories (Davutoğlu 1997 and 2001). His "zero problems with neighbors" policy included mending ties with neighbors and engaging in (mostly unsuccessful) conflict mediation efforts between Iran and the West, Israel and Syria, Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia, and Hamas and Fatah in Palestine (Kirişçi 2009).

Finally, during this period the government engaged in an effort to extend its control over the foreign affairs bureaucracy, with some success. Erdoğan publicly chastised senior diplomats and retired ambassadors who criticized his foreign policy interventions, deriding them as "monşerler" (from the French *mon cher*) to imply they were elitist and out of touch.<sup>2</sup> The foreign ministry started accepting non-career candidates as ambassadors and subsequently appointing them to career jobs in the foreign service, a move that met with resistance from career ambassadors. The overall size of the foreign service bureaucracy expanded significantly under Davutoğlu, and many of these appointees were followers of Fethullah Gülen.<sup>3</sup>

### **Imperialization (2011–2013)**

“Imperialization” refers to the process by which Turkey’s domestic and foreign politics became enmeshed as the country’s decision makers articulated with growing boldness their aspiration to re-engineer social and political dynamics not only within but also beyond Turkey’s borders. The period after the general elections of June 2011 is when Erdoğan solidified his grip over the ruling party, while the governing coalition came to dominate Turkey’s state institutions.

Inside the AKP, the relatively pluralistic party structure of the first period gave way to an increasingly centralized arrangement, with Erdoğan at the top of the power pyramid. The prime minister handpicked loyalist AKP candidates for the third parliamentary election in 2011, excluding those considered too independent or too close to Gül. The AKP’s third election victory and triumph over the military-bureaucratic establishment were coupled with Turkey’s continued economic growth at a time of a global financial slump to boost its rise as an ambitious regional actor at the outset of the “Arab Spring” uprisings. The confluence of so many propitious developments apparently instilled in Erdoğan and Davutoğlu the sense of invincibility and manifest destiny that underlies the ideological fervor and imperial hubris that characterize this period (Cornell 2012; Özkan 2014).

Confident of its popular backing and institutional dominance, the ruling party abandoned its informal alliance with the liberals at home. The already waning discourse of liberal democratic reform of the early AKP years was replaced with an official rhetoric and agenda aimed at re-engineering Turkey’s state and society in an explicitly Sunni Turkish image through conservative social and education policies, and glamorous construction projects, such as building the world’s biggest mosque on Istanbul’s highest hilltop. It was also in this period that the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a body founded in 1924 to ensure the state’s control of religion, was transformed into a key pillar of the government’s religious-nationalist agenda, significantly expanding its budget, staff, and activities both at home and abroad (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018).

The imposition of this religious-nationalist hegemonic agenda, and the ruling party's growing intolerance of pluralism and dissent, stoked new tensions among secular Turks, Kurds, and Alevis, triggering an increasingly violent cycle of protests and repression of civil liberties. (Alevis are followers of a heterodox version of Islam. Making up around 25 percent of Turkey's population, this is an ethnically diverse community that has been historically persecuted by the Sunni majority. Hence, they have been strong supporters of secularism in the Turkish Republic.) The AKP and the Gülenists maintained their coalition in this period to reap the benefits of their victory over the military-bureaucratic guardians; however, the elimination of this common foe also gradually brought to fore their differences and rival hegemonic ambitions.<sup>4</sup>

Abroad, following a period of hesitation, the Erdoğan-Davutoğlu duo earnestly embraced the Arab Spring uprisings, seeing in the collapse of long-standing secular dictators and the rise of fellow Islamists an historic opportunity to reshape the wider region in Turkey's image. Discarding the "zero problems" policy, the Turkish government lent enthusiastic support to Muslim Brotherhood-linked movements in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Preferring to see Turkey—a constitutionally secular, procedurally democratic Muslim-majority country anchored in Western institutions—emerge as the winner of the Arab Spring rather than Iran or Saudi Arabia, Western governments (particularly the UK and US) turned a blind eye to the deteriorating state of democracy and civil liberties inside the country, and actively started promoting it as a model to the wider region (Pack and Van Creveld 2012; Akkoyunlu et al. 2013; Tuğal 2016). In 2012, following a five-hour meeting with then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Davutoğlu described US-Turkey relations as enjoying their "golden age" (*Economist* 2012).

International praise of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, combined with the AKP's successes at home, boosted the confidence of Turkey's decision makers as they pushed on with their hegemonic project. A consequence of this heightened confidence was overlooking or downplay-

ing the threats posed to Turkey's stability by growing sociopolitical tensions at home and the rapidly deteriorating bilateral ties in the region, including with not only Syria, but also Iran, the Iranian-backed central government in Iraq, and Russia. All these tensions boiled over in near simultaneous fashion after mid-2013.

### **Isolation (2013–2016)**

The fourth phase saw the dramatic collapse of Turkey's regional ambitions from mid-2013 onwards, as the tide turned decisively against the AKP's Islamist allies in the region. Muslim Brotherhood-backed movements and governments were forced into alliance with secular parties in Tunisia, overthrown and suppressed in Egypt, and marginalized or radicalized by violent jihadi groups in Libya and Syria. The Syrian war and the AKP government's increasingly desperate desire to see the end of the regime of Bashar al-Assad not only led to the rapid re-securitization of Turkey's borders with Syria, Iraq, and Iran, but also triggered a massive influx of refugees and foreign fighters into Turkey.

After the capture of the Iraqi city of Mosul by the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, and a spate of deadly terror attacks in European cities, the Western focus shifted from toppling the Assad regime to defeating the IS in Syria and Iraq. The Turkish government's reluctance to prevent the movement of jihadi fighters crossing into Syria, together with its heavy-handed suppression of civilian mass demonstrations ("Gezi protests") in the summer of 2013, transformed its image in the West from a regional model to an illiberal regime and a facilitator of violent jihadism (Tisdall 2016).

The US-Turkey relationship was further strained as the former entered into a strategic alliance with Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Washington came to regard as a reliable and effective fighting force against the IS. The Turkish government viewed the YPG as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), with which it has been engaged in a three-decade conflict, but had maintained a fragile ceasefire and peace negotiations since early 2013. Although fraught with mutual distrust from the outset, these

talks nonetheless augured a period of relative calm in an otherwise turbulent part of the country at a time of heightened regional instability. The outbreak of the Islamist-Kurdish conflict in Syria and Iraq in late 2014 significantly exacerbated sociopolitical tensions between the AKP and the Kurds in Turkey, contributing to the collapse of the peace process and the beginning of a new period of conflict and destruction after mid-2015.

Adding to Turkish decision makers' sense of insecurity was the military coup in Egypt against President Mohammad Morsi, a close ally of the AKP government, and the bloody repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013. For Erdoğan and his supporters, the subdued Western response to the Egyptian coup, in contrast to the widespread coverage and condemnation of the Turkish government's response to the Gezi protests, was evidence of Western hypocrisy and betrayal, as well as a cautionary tale for the AKP. The growing distrust between the United States, Europe, and the Turkish government became clear in Erdoğan's increasingly vindictive anti-Western rhetoric.<sup>5</sup>

While Turkey's Western ties were in decline, its already strained relationship with Russia also entered into crisis following the downing of a Russian fighter jet by the Turkish military along the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015. The incident led the Russian government to suspend all military and intelligence cooperation with Turkey, impose a series of trade sanctions on Turkish products and businesses, and accuse the AKP government of collaborating with IS (Brooks-Pollock 2015).

Several factors at the domestic level contributed to Turkish policymakers' inability to respond effectively to the fast-changing international environment. The first was the "hangover" from the imperial hubris of the previous period. During this period, the Erdoğan-Davutoğlu duo further strengthened its grip on the party and the state, with Erdoğan becoming Turkey's first popularly elected president, and Davutoğlu his prime minister, in August 2014. But the concentration of institutional power and the silencing of independent voices within the party and the foreign affairs bureaucracy meant that

checks-and-balance and advisory mechanisms no longer functioned efficiently. Davutoğlu, in particular, appeared insistent on pursuing his dream even after his vision of a neo-Ottoman Middle East had clearly failed. Secondly, Turkey's institutions and democratic process were plunged into a state of near paralysis as a result of the power struggle that boiled over between the AKP and the Gülenists in this period. A Gülenist-led criminal investigation launched in December 2013 implicated senior AKP figures and Erdoğan's own family members with corruption, including financially benefiting from secretly breaching international sanctions on Iran. In return, the government responded by suppressing the case and swiftly purging prosecutors and police officers associated with Gülen's Hizmet Movement.

The shattering of the intra-Islamist alliance, which was the backbone of the AKP's governing coalition since 2002, had far-reaching repercussions on all four levels of analysis: it propelled Erdoğan to seize further control of the party, expelling or marginalizing sympathizers of Gülen, including long-time comrades and senior figures, and replacing them with a younger generation of loyalists. As a sign of his pragmatist political instincts, the Turkish president started laying the groundwork for a new coalition of strategic convenience, consisting of the far-right Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), Gülen's rivals within the wider Naqshbandi Sufi religious order (Cornell and Kaya 2015), as well as secular nationalist former enemies of Erdoğan, who were imprisoned during the coup trials but released in early 2014 when the verdicts were suddenly overturned. Although the consolidation of this coalition was accomplished only after the failed coup attempt of July 2016, members of this budding coalition started filling the growing gap in the state bureaucracy and security services left by the Gülenists in this period (Çakır 2014; Başaran 2014).

As the Islamist fratricide led to a traumatic split within Turkey's conservative Muslim community, it also spilled over to international politics. The business and political networks of the Hizmet Movement abroad, from which the AKP had benefited extensively, now effectively functioned as an anti-Erdoğan lobby (Lewontin 2016).

For its part, the AKP government officially declared Hizmet a terrorist organization in 2015 and stepped up diplomatic, lobbying, and intelligence efforts, directly or through its transnational institutions like the Diyanet, to crack down on Gülenist activities abroad (Arnsdorf 2015; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018). The zero-sum nature of this power struggle created a vicious cycle that culminated in the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, allegedly masterminded by Gülenist officers who were about to be discharged from the military, and the subsequent clampdown by Erdoğan (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016).

### **Survival (2016-... )**

The fifth period marks the end of the institutional confusion and near-paralysis in Turkish foreign policy in the face of mounting multi-dimensional challenges, and the beginning of a new period of activism, reflecting both the worldview and interests of the new ruling coalition, and the pragmatic survival instincts of President Erdoğan. The starting point of this period is not the coup attempt of July 2016 but the replacement of Davutoğlu with Binali Yıldırım, an Erdoğan loyalist, as prime minister. Rumors of Erdoğan's displeasure with Davutoğlu's leadership of the party had been public since the AKP lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in the June 2015 general election (it subsequently regained this majority by engineering a "repeat vote" in November). Erdoğan supporters publicly questioned Davutoğlu's loyalty to the leader, criticized his close ties with the US government, and blamed him for Turkey's disastrous involvement in Syria. Following his replacement, *Foreign Policy* ran a report quoting senior US officials lamenting Davutoğlu's fall from grace as the loss of Washington's "behind-the-scenes ally" (Hudson 2016).

Davutoğlu's departure not only cemented Erdoğan's personal domination of the AKP, but also confirmed the emergence of the anti-Western nationalist alliance as Turkey's new governing coalition. This coalition has passionately supported the mass purges and detentions of suspected government opponents of different ideological hues, which extended across state institutions to all sectors of public

life under the state of emergency declared after the abortive coup attempt (Schenkkan 2018). For years a fervent critic of the government, the MHP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, turned into the president's first informal then formal coalition partner, in support of sweeping constitutional amendments to replace the country's parliamentary system with a strong executive presidentialism that would take Turkey "towards an authoritarian and personal regime" (Venice Commission 2017).<sup>6</sup> While Bahçeli's dramatic volte-face led to a split within his own party, ultimately the nationalist support proved critical in handing Erdoğan a slim victory in the constitutional referendum of April 2017, which took place under conditions of suspended democracy and "failed to meet international standards" (OSCE/ODIHR 2017). In return, the MHP-linked nationalists reportedly gained preferential access to state institutions, especially the police force (Tezkan 2017). The party also successfully pushed its anti-Kurdish, anti-liberal, and militarist platform onto the government's political agenda.

Also joining the new coalition were secular nationalist former foes of Erdoğan, including longtime proponents of geopolitical Eurasianism. This new governing coalition made its mark on Turkey's foreign policy orientation. While Turkey's ties with both the United States and the EU continued to deteriorate, efforts to mend fences with Russia gained speed following the abortive coup. A public apology by Erdoğan for the downing of the Russian jet, now blamed on rogue Gülenist officers, was followed by the lifting of Russian sanctions on Turkish businesses. Putin and Erdoğan met a total of eight times in 2017, and agreed on the USD 2.5 billion sale of a Russian S-400 missile system to Turkey, leading the United States to block a planned sale of 100 F-35 combat aircrafts to Turkey in response (Insinna et al. 2020).

The rapprochement with Russia also resulted in a sharp turnaround in Turkey's Syria policy. From 2017 onwards, putting aside years of rivalry and mutual accusations, the Turkish government engaged in a series of talks with Russia and Iran over the future of Syria. Having abandoned the dream of remaking the Middle East in a

neo-Ottoman image, the AKP government shifted its focus to the more limited goal of containing the expansion of US-backed Kurdish forces in northern Syria. With the blessing of Russia, the Turkish military, together with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), conducted ground operations in northern Syria in 2017, 2018, and 2019, capturing and occupying large portions of territory from the YPG as well as ISIS.<sup>7</sup>

Used to drum up nationalist sentiments at home, Turkey's "conquests" in northern Syria augured the beginning of a new era of confrontational militarism in Turkish foreign policy. Instead of relying on "soft power" tools such as trade and diplomacy, this new foreign policy has been built around heavy investment in the national defense industry that saw Turkey's arms imports decrease by 48 percent between 2015 and 2019, and defense companies such as electronics manufacturer ASELSAN and Turkish Aerospace Industries emerge as competitive global exporters (SIPRI 2020). Reminiscent of the tensions of the 1990s, Turkey came to the brink of conflict with Greece, and by extension the European Union, as it contested maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean over gas exploration rights.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in a sign of the natural limits of Ankara's alliance with Moscow, Turkey has become strategically involved in the conflicts in Libya and the Caucasus, supporting the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) against the Russian, French, UAE, and Egyptian-backed Libyan National Army (LNA), and helping Azerbaijan reclaim parts of Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh (Helal 2020; Danforth 2020).

Despite the aggressive Turkish-Islamic propaganda and chest-beating that has characterized this period, Erdoğan's embrace of his former enemies at home and abroad has been driven chiefly by pragmatic survival instincts rather than ideological conviction. Indeed, the pragmatist turn in Turkey's foreign policy saw the AKP abandon some of its most cherished Islamist causes (Kirişçi 2016). In 2016, Turkey and Israel reached a deal to end the six-year standoff that was triggered by the Israeli raid on the Turkish-led aid flotilla, while Erdoğan expressed hopes for improved ties with Jerusalem (Daily Sabah 2020). Lobbying for support from the White House in the early days of Don-

ald Trump's presidency, the Turkish government and pro-government media carefully refrained from any public criticism of Trump's Islamophobic statements or travel ban on Muslims (Arnsdorf 2017; BBC News 2017). Turkey has also remained mostly silent on China's genocidal policy on Uighur Turks and even signed an extradition treaty opening the way for Uighurs in Turkey to be deported to China. Finally, the Erdoğan government has made overtures to reset relations with Egypt, suggesting that even Ankara's long-standing support for the Muslim Brotherhood, many of whose members have sought refuge in Turkey, can be sacrificed on the altar of political pragmatism (Hassanein 2021).

## **DISCUSSION**

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the international system has moved beyond the "liberal triumphalism" of the early post-Cold War era into a volatile and unpredictable phase, characterized by wars, occupations, revolutions, and state collapse in the Middle East, socioeconomic crises and the populist backlash in the West, and the rise of Russia and China as challengers (in different capacities) to the Western-led liberal order. This unfolding systemic shift in the international system has coincided with—and also directly affected—successive power struggles for the reins of the Turkish state, which first saw the coalition led by the AKP and the Gülenists disassemble the tutelage of the secular nationalist military and senior bureaucracy, then descend into an even more destructive power struggle among themselves. The concurrence of these domestic and international changes has infused a high degree of instability and unpredictability into Turkey's foreign policy behavior.

A summary of the defining actors and dynamics at play at each level of analysis in the five phases discussed in this paper is presented in table 1. What conclusions can this help us draw to explain the fluctuations in Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP, the mechanism of its foreign policy production, and the role of ideology and pragmatism in its policy outputs?

**Table 1. Determinants of Turkey's foreign policy before and under the AKP**

Period	Party	Coalition	State	International Environment	Outcome Drive
Pre-AKP	N/A	Military + Senior Bureaucracy <i>US</i> <i>(EU)</i>	Tutelary control	Cold War, Post-Cold War liberal triumphalism	Western alliance
2002–2007	FM Gül (EM Babacan) (PM Erdoğan)	Gülenists Liberals <i>EU</i> <i>US</i>	Contested control, Tutelary resistance	Global liquidity boom, EU expansion, “War against Terror”	Europeanization Pragmatism
2007–2011	FM Davutoğlu PM Erdoğan (Pres. Gül)	Gülenists (Liberals) <i>US</i> <i>(EU)</i>	Enhanced AKP + Gülenist control, Disassembling tutelage	Global financial crisis, US retreat, EU turns inwards	Autonomization Pragmatism (Ideology)
2011–2013	PM Erdoğan FM Davutoğlu Gülenists	<i>Muslim Brotherhood</i> <i>US</i>	AKP + Gülenist domination	Arab Spring, Rise of Muslim Brotherhood, “The Turkish model”	Imperialization Ideology
2013–2016	Pres. Erdoğan PM Davutoğlu	(MHP)	Intra-Islamist split, Institutional paralysis	End of Arab Spring, Collapse of MB, Syrian war	Isolation Ideology (Pragmatism)
2016–...	Pres. Erdoğan	MHP. Secular-nationalists. Naqshbandi orders. <i>Russia</i>	Personalistic control, Institutional insecurity, State of Exception	Syrian war, Far-right populism, Russian and Chinese influence	Survival Pragmatism

Parenteses in the table denote lesser or reduced influence. Italics indicate non-domestic actors.

The changes at the level of the state and the party explain the transformation of the mechanism of foreign policy-making. While the AKP gradually supplanted the military-bureaucratic establishment as the central policy-making actor within the state, the party itself came under the control of President Erdoğan. As a result, Turkish foreign policy has moved away from being a highly professionalized

bureaucratic process with limited personal or popular input under tutelary control to a highly de-institutionalized arrangement under the personalized control of a micromanaging strongman. This shift is visible in the way that long-established diplomatic norms and processes were cast aside in Turkey's public engagements with various Western governments after 2013. Never before, for instance, did a Turkish head of state publicly accuse a chancellor of postwar Germany of Nazism.<sup>9</sup> Nor was it ever part of Turkey's diplomatic tradition to detain foreign citizens on questionable charges, without trial, only to use them as bargaining chips in strategic negotiations with their governments.<sup>10</sup> The personalization of Turkey's state institutions under Erdoğan has also made his personal and political interests—and those of his family—inseparable from Turkey's national interests. As a result, a highly personalized power struggle between Erdoğan and Gülen became the core crisis of the state.

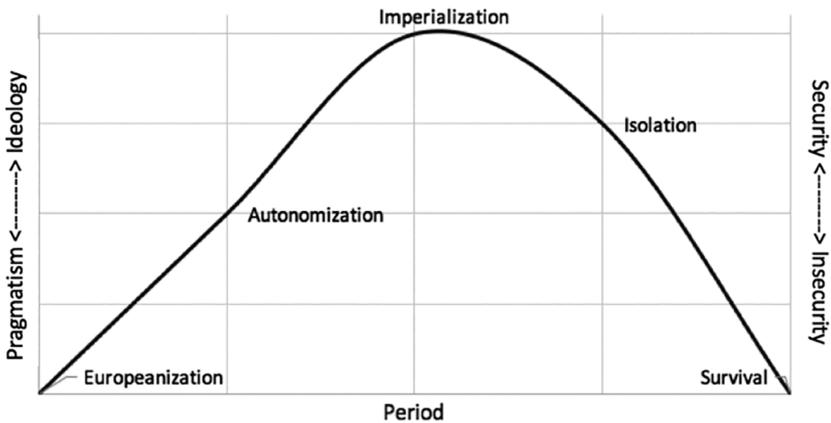
Contrary to the popular assumption that the AKP's Islamism has pulled Turkey away from the West, ideology appears to play a limited role in charting Turkey's geopolitical orientation. Not only did the United States and the EU support the AKP in its mission to dismantle the tutelage of Turkey's secular military well into the 2010s, but, as noted above, the US-Turkey relationship was said to be in its "golden age" at the height of the AKP's Islamist zeal between 2011 and 2013, when Turkey was lauded and promoted as a model to the wider region. Conversely, the most turbulent point in Turkey's Western ties arrived in the aftermath of this "imperialist" period, when Erdoğan and the AKP allied with ultranationalist former rivals against fellow coreligionists, abandoning long-guarded Islamist positions in foreign policy.

What explains the fluctuating influence of ideology and pragmatism in the making of Turkish foreign policy? An overview of the five phases under the AKP discussed in this paper (summarized in table 1) suggests that it is the decision makers' sense of security in their positions of power (i.e., within the state). While pragmatic policy-making and alliance-building were most clearly observable in the

first (Europeanization) and final (Survival) periods, ideology appears as the core driver of Turkey's foreign policy in the middle (Imperialization) period. The second (Autonomization) and the fourth (Isolation) periods display a mix of both, with pragmatism still weighing more heavily in the second period and ideology in the fourth (figure 1).

The rise and fall of ideology as the core driver of foreign policy is a direct outcome of the AKP decision makers' confidence (or lack thereof) in their positions of power: as their self-confidence grew, so did the role of ideology in decision making. Having consolidated popular support and seized control of key state institutions, and feeling less constrained by domestic and international threats, the country's rulers were able to publicize and pursue their ideal vision for Turkey and the wider region, informed by an overtly Islamist reading of the world. Conversely, when key actors were insecure in their positions and facing threats to their survival, they opted for pragmatic policy decisions and alliances that would help consolidate their positions. In the process they did away with old hostilities, ideological ambitions, and political commitments.

Finally, how pragmatism or ideology translates into actual policy appears to be based on key AKP decision makers' leadership



**Figure 1.** Pragmatism vs. Ideology in the AKP's foreign policy

styles, political skills, and worldviews. In other words, in the making of foreign policy, individual actors also clearly matter: Gül's reconciliatory, diplomacy-based approach characterized Turkey's foreign policy during his tenure as foreign minister and in the early years of his presidency. However, his timid, nonconfrontational nature meant that his influence waned as more ambitious actors emerged on the scene. Davutoğlu took the stage as Turkey's intellectual grand strategist, receiving international praise and even being compared to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for his academic gravitas and "brilliant statecraft" (Djavadi 2009; Falk 2011). Yet unlike the arch-realist Kissinger, Davutoğlu turned out to be one of the most ideologically driven among the AKP's foreign policy makers. Seeing in the Arab Spring uprisings the fulfillment of Turkey's (and arguably his own) manifest destiny, he abandoned the cautious multilateralism of the "zero problems" policy and invested heavily in regime change in Syria. Stubbornly attached to realizing his long-standing ambition for Turkey and its neighborhood, he was unable to acknowledge the failures of his policies and devise a new strategy on the basis of the altered reality on the ground.

In contrast, the pragmatist-in-chief of Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP has proved to be Erdoğan, whose populist rhetoric and brash undiplomatic style has been often mistaken for ideological fervor. As a ruthless politician, Erdoğan has demonstrated a remarkable ability to make and break alliances and radically shift positions, all the while maintaining his popularity and expanding his personal control over the party and the state. His continued dominance of Turkey's decision-making structures implies that there will be more twists and turns in store for the country's foreign policy in the future.

## NOTES

1. Eurasianism emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century "as a major intellectual movement in Turkey ... with Euroskeptical, anti-American, Russophile, neo-nationalist, secularist, and authoritarian

- tendencies, and including among its ranks socialists, nationalists, Kemalists, and Maoists” (Aktürk 2015).
2. Following the incident in Davos in 2009 Erdoğan said, “Our understanding of foreign policy is about standing tall. Some of these *mon chers* may struggle to understand this. That’s how they were raised. ... We know very well what to do and where” (Haberturk 2009).
  3. According to the Foreign Ministry, the number of career diplomats increased from 542 in late 2002 to 1202 in the beginning of 2016, with the biggest expansion occurring in 2010–2013. In the post-2016 coup attempt crackdown, when hundreds of career diplomats were expelled from the Foreign Ministry, it was estimated that up to a quarter of the foreign service was made up of Gülen followers (Ergin 2017).
  4. The first crack in the coalition came when Fethullah Gülen, in his first-ever interview with a US news organization, openly criticized the Turkish government for its handling of the crisis with Israel following the flotilla incident in 2010. See Lauria (2010).
  5. Referring to the West in a speech to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Erdoğan said “foreigners love oil, gold, diamonds, and the cheap labor force of the Islamic world. They like the conflicts, fights and quarrels of the Middle East. Believe me, they don’t like us. They look like friends, but they want us dead, they like seeing our children die” (*Hurriyet Daily News* 2014).
  6. Only three years previously, the MHP leader had described the move towards presidentialism as “a death sentence for democracy, a warrant for one-man dictatorship, a permit for corruption and theft” (Pitel 2018).
  7. İlnur Çevik, advisor to President Erdoğan, said in an interview, “If Russia had not opened up the airspace, forget entering al-Bab and Afrin, we could not even have flown drones (in Syria) ... In recent times, Russia has been proving itself to our president. It has shown a good performance, as well. My personal grade is 10 out of 10” (Ahval 2018).

8. Underpinning this confrontational posture in the Mediterranean is a naval doctrine known as “Mavi Vatan” (Blue Homeland), whose main architect and promoter is a Eurasianist former rear admiral, Cem Gürdeniz, who was sentenced to 18 years in prison in the coup trials but released in 2015 (Gingeras 2020).
9. In a speech Erdogan accused Angela Merkel personally of “using Nazi methods” against his Turkish supporters in Germany (DW 2017).
10. The Turkish president made an unsuccessful bid to exchange a US pastor accused of spying and jailed in Turkey, with Fethullah Gülen, who is based in the US. Similarly, the Turkish government released a Turkish-German journalist, who was arrested for spreading “terrorist propaganda,” after a lengthy bargaining process with the German officials (Tremblay 2018).

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