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RESEARCH

Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy in the middle East and the black sea regions: navigating uncertainty amid regional and global flux

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Abstract
The study of Turkey's foreign policy and its quest for strategic autonomy has focused on the country itself. However, the literature has so far not provided a comparative overview of how the foreign policy of strategic autonomy has been pursued and what responses it elicited by key states concerning Turkey's foreign policy. The introduction to the Special Issue, Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy in the Middle East and the Black Sea regions: Navigating uncertainty amid regional and global flux, explains how the volume addresses this gap in the literature.

Keywords Turkey · Foreign policy · Strategic autonomy · Middle East · Black Sea

Introduction

The volatility in the Middle East and the war in Ukraine simultaneously create challenges and opportunities for middle powers, testing their ability to navigate an increasingly fluid and fragmented international order. The Middle East has long been one of the most unstable regions in the world, yet the past fifteen years have been remarkable, even by its own standards. Since 2011, the Arab uprisings have reshaped

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the political landscape across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). A brief period of regime changes was followed by civil wars and the collapse of state institutions in Libya, Syria and Yemen. More recently, the war between Israel and Hamas that started in 2023 following the attacks on Israeli cities, towns and Kibbutzim has significantly affected power dynamics, most notably diminishing Iran's influence in the region. In December 2024, after more than fifty years of rule, the al-Assad regime was overthrown by opposition groups, an outcome driven by internal political decay, the declining support from Bashar al-Assad's main backers, Russia and Iran and the military impact exerted by Israel and Turkey. The geopolitical changes in the Middle East were accompanied by Russia's withdrawal from the region amid its prolonged war with Ukraine and a relative contraction of US involvement compared to the first decade of the 21st century. This has led middle powers in the region to become more active in their foreign affairs.

Meanwhile, in the Black Sea region, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale war against Ukraine that started in 2022 transformed the region into a space for great power competition. This militarisation has heightened security risks, undermined regional stability, and deepened geopolitical fault lines. The growing involvement of Western powers has further sharpened the geopolitical divide between NATO members and Russia. Also, the Russia-Ukraine war imposed additional pressure on energy infrastructure, trade flows, and supply chain security in the region and beyond.

On a broader scale, at a time when global political uncertainty intensified, shifts in global and regional power centres created new opportunities for middle powers to exert their influence beyond their borders, enabling them to assume greater agency. At the same time, regional security concerns dominated the political agenda of these actors. As a result, "strategic autonomy" emerged as both a necessity and an opportunity for middle powers, which we conceptualise in positional terms, namely, states that are materially less powerful than major powers but still influential actors in regional and global domains.[1] In the wake of international political flux, discussions on the drivers, instruments, and limitations of a more autonomous middle power behaviour gained prominence. With varying degrees of success, these actors pursued a range of policies to manage a rapidly changing environment.

The foreign policy of Turkey, a middle power and key regional actor, has undergone a significant transformation since the beginning of the 21st century.[2] The early 2000s were characterised by increasing interdependence in Turkey's relations with the MENA region, with economic tools and cultural proximity serving as primary instruments of political alignment. Turkey's stronger ties with regional actors were also complemented by cooperative engagement with Western counterparts. Despite certain policy disagreements with the US following the Bush administration's deci-

[1] The literature on middle powers is extensive and the debate on how to define them is charged. Alternative approaches to ours have defined middle powers in terms of behaviour, e.g., tendency to pursue multilateral policies and prioritize coalition building (Cooper 2018; Karim 2018). Others have conceptualized middle powers in terms of identity (De Bhal 2023:407). However, we have found the latter conceptions less applicable to our case studies and hence have conceptualized them in positional terms.

[2] There is a growing literature on Turkey's middle power behaviour in a changing international system. For three recent examples, see (Kutlay and Öniş 2021; Altunışık 2023; Soyaltin-Colella and Demiryol 2023).



sion to invade Iraq in 2003, Turkey's relations with the West remained largely positive. Ankara even commenced membership negotiations with the EU in 2005.

The 2010s, however, paint a different picture in Turkish foreign policy. First, post-2008 developments in the international economic order, which followed the financial crisis, accelerated the power shifts from the West to other parts of the world. Second, the Arab uprisings changed the political landscape in the MENA region. In such an environment, Turkey's non-interventionism principle of the previous decade was replaced with a more proactive foreign policy stance. Ankara actively engaged with the regional actors to shape the course of political dislocations in the Arab uprising countries by siding with opposition groups in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria. As the Arab uprisings evolved into a conflictual path, Turkey found itself in the midst of simultaneous confrontations with several actors. As the individual contributions to this Special Issue (SI) will demonstrate, for instance, Ankara's relations with Israel and the military government in Egypt progressively deteriorated; the bilateral ties with several other Middle Eastern countries (bar Qatar) also became more confrontational. Beyond the region, Turkey's relations with the EU and the US plunged into a vicious cycle, placing the country in a constant state of crisis management in its foreign affairs. Turkey's quest for an autonomous foreign policy behaviour in this period was qualitatively different from the past because the government's policies "ceased to accord priority to Turkey's association with the West" (Altunışık 2023, p. 667).

As a result, the 2010s came to represent a striking case of middle power overstretch in Turkish foreign policy (Aran and Kutlay 2024). As extensively documented in the contributions to this SI, from 2021 onwards, Turkey has had to adopt a damage control approach in its external affairs. Ankara tried to develop more nuanced strategies for its bilateral relations with Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries. As this SI underscores, with its successes and failures, Turkish foreign policy offers an illustrative example of how middle powers navigate uncertainty in regional and global politics—and how other key regional actors respond to their actions.

Objectives of the special issue

The foreign policy objectives that Turkey has pursued in its near and far abroad have generated significant scholarly work. However, there is a lack of comparative research on how regional actors have responded to Turkey's foreign policy goals amid this changing environment. This SI aims to fill this gap by pursuing four main objectives. The primary objective, which we seek to meet in the first part of the SI, is to identify the drivers of Turkish foreign policy, both near and far abroad, with a special focus on the Middle East and Black Sea regions since 2011. Achieving this objective is geared toward accounting for Turkey's foreign policy approach of establishing "strategic autonomy" amid the shift from US-led unipolarity in the international system to a contested multipolarity and the resulting political, economic, and military changes in Turkey's near and far abroad. The second objective is to trace and explain the foreign policy responses of key middle powers in the Middle East and Black Sea regions to Turkey's foreign policy and the objectives it has sought to achieve. The selected case studies include Egypt, Iran, Israel, Qatar and Ukraine, which were chosen because of



their significance to Turkey across central foreign policy domains: regional security, economic statecraft, and energy cooperation.

The third objective is to propose analytical benchmarks that capture Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy in its near and far abroad, in terms of foreign policy. This objective will be realised by setting clear analytical indicators across a spectrum of "alignment" and "friction". At one end of the analytical spectrum, we locate the notion of "alignment", which refers to mutually complementary activity between Turkey and a regional actor across all our selected foreign policy domains: regional security, economic statecraft, and energy cooperation. At the other end of the analytical spectrum, we locate "friction", which refers to the breakdown and cessation of activities in all domains and a rise in the probability of military hostilities. We also provide intermediary categories along the analytical continuum, denoting situations where relations occur across three or fewer foreign policy domains. Using the comparative analysis of Turkish foreign policy goals towards regional actors in relation to key foreign policy domains, we have provided a conceptually and empirically grounded "friction-alignment" framework, which is applied in the case studies included in this SI. It is designed to delineate the patterns of conflict and cooperation in a changing regional order in Turkey's neighbourhood. Drawing on the first three objectives, the fourth aim of the SI is to document the opportunities and challenges for promoting peace and stability through a more sustainable regional order in Turkey's near and far abroad in an age of global flux.

In achieving these four objectives, this SI seeks to make two major contributions. First, debates on global power shifts from US-led unipolarity toward contested multipolarity, as well as scholarship on "post-American" or "post-liberal" international order, have been reflected in the analysis of Turkish political economy and foreign policy. However, there is no systematic comparative research on how key regional actors have responded to Turkey's foreign policy goals and ambitions in its near and far abroad, with special reference to the Middle East and Black Sea regions. These two regions are at the centre of hegemonic rivalry following the civil war in Syria, the Israel-Hamas war since 7 October 2023, with its regional ramifications and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is why the SI focuses on Turkey's near and far abroad and centres on them. This SI, by developing a two-sided perspective —how regional actors have perceived and responded to Turkish foreign policy goals in select domains—aims to address this gap in the literature.

Second, the quest for "strategic autonomy" has become a central tenet of Turkish foreign policy in both regions over the last decade. Indeed, strategic autonomy has now become a buzzword informing Turkey's delicate "balancing act" between Western actors, Russia, and China. However, there is still ambiguity regarding what "strategic autonomy" means in the Turkish context and how Turkish policymakers operationalize the concept —that is, its material and normative drivers, its implementation, as well as its limits. Hence, this SI comprehensively explores Turkish policymakers' understanding of strategic autonomy, its limitations and soft spots, as well as the responses it has engendered amid regional and global changes. We hope that the SI's focus on Turkey's foreign policy and the response by key regional middle powers will provide students of the Middle East and Black Sea regions with a rich comparative analysis, pushing the conceptual and empirical boundaries of the debates on these dynamic regions further. Discussions on the concept of strategic autonomy within the discipline of IR will also benefit from the contributions to this SI.



The articles by Altunışık, Balta and Bal, Özcan, and Tür examine Turkey's foreign policy towards various countries in the Middle East and Black Sea regions amid growing regional and global uncertainty and volatility. The cases of Israel (Altunışık) and Egypt (Özcan) illustrate Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy, as its policies toward these states diverged significantly from those of its traditional Western allies. In the post Arab uprisings era, Turkey's stance towards Israel increasingly deviated from that of its Western partners, as the AKP government, balancing ideology and pragmatism, oscillated between discord and rapprochement. With Egypt, President Erdoğan's harsh criticism of President al-Sisi after the 2013 coup triggered a series of crises and a sharp downgrading of bilateral ties.

Turkey's relationship with Iran was more complex, marked by both alignment and discord, but within the broader pursuit of autonomy from traditional Western allies. By contrast, relations with Qatar, as Tür's article demonstrates, represented a rare example of alignment in Turkey's Middle East policy during the 2010s, bolstering Ankara's quest for regional influence and strategic autonomy. In the Black Sea region, the case of Ukraine (Balta and Bal) highlights the dilemmas of a middle power trying to navigate volatile regional and international contexts. Turkey's NATO membership made its balancing act in the Russia-Ukraine War especially complicated, as it oscillated between alignment, autonomy, opportunism and dissonance.

Taken together, these cases underscore two key points: First, faced with fluid regional contexts and shifting power dynamics, Turkey's foreign policy and its quest for strategic autonomy have been pragmatic and flexible. From 2020 onward, Ankara sought "normalization" with several Middle Eastern powers with which it had adversarial relations after the Arab uprisings, including Egypt and Israel, though normalization with the latter collapsed as the Israel-Hamas war progressed. Second, the articles highlight the deep entanglement of foreign policy with domestic politics. Thus, domestic factors, such as the AKP's political objectives, ideological orientation, economic considerations, and coalition dynamics, have consistently shaped its external strategies and pursuit of strategic autonomy.

The article by Aydın-Düzgit, Kutlay and Keyman situates these debates within the broader concept of strategic autonomy in Turkish foreign policy. The article conceptualises strategic autonomy with reference to three dimensions: structural dynamics, domestic political priorities, and economic infrastructure—and highlights its potential and limitations in the Turkish context.

Seeking to examine the responses by regional key actors to Turkey's foreign policy and its objectives, the SI critically analyses the reactions of Israel (Aran), Qatar (Miller), Egypt (Stein), and Iran (Şen). According to Aran, since 2011, changing regional and domestic dynamics have prompted a shift in Israel's foreign policy towards Turkey. Whilst in the past the relationship was asymmetrical and favouring Turkey, domestic and regional changes encouraged Israel to recalibrate its stance toward a more balanced, equivalence-based relationship with Ankara. Stein demonstrates that Egypt's foreign policy, shaped by its dependence on the US, strategic alignment with Saudi Arabia, and domestic constraints, remained securitized and resistant to the AKP's attempts to export its political model. On the other hand, in a more positive way, Miller demonstrated that both Turkey and Qatar capitalized on the post-Arab uprisings and multipolar context to deepen ties, with Qatar also skillfully leveraging its "derivative power" during the

2017–2021 embargo to shape Turkish policies and advance its own interests. Thus, the SI ahead provides a comprehensive overview of Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy in the Middle East and Black Sea region, and the response it elicited from key regional powers. We would like to thank the British Institute at Ankara (BIAA) for supporting this SI through a research grant, which enabled us to organize the workshop.

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Author contributions All authors contributed equally to writing the introduction.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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