



# Turkey's Foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: 2011-2022

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**Abstract:** This study has been undertaken to analyze Turkey's foreign policy determinants in the Eastern Mediterranean region which has gained increasing significance owing to the discovery of hydrocarbon resources in recent years and Turkey undertaking aggressive and assertive diplomacy towards the region to become the regional hegemon and exude dominance. The study follows qualitative reasoning.

**Index terms-** foreign policy, hard power, soft power, Turkey, Eastern Mediterranean

## INTRODUCTION

Turkey's foreign policy has undergone significant changes since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. These changes correspond to pivotal moments in modern Turkish history that severely impacted how Turkey views itself, its neighbouring states, its region, and the Western powers. Some of the crucial determinants/drivers of Turkey's foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean include- Turkey's geographical location, Neo-Ottomanism, Mavi Vatan, Islamic Revivalism, the personal ambitions and visions of President Erdogan, and energy security. The origins of these determinants can be traced back to certain domestic factors and foreign policy choices of the country's governing elites- namely, the Lausanne syndrome, Turkey's Strategic Depth doctrine, the Arab Spring, and the 2016 Presidential coup. Therefore, this study is aimed at analyzing Turkey's foreign policy determinants to understand their impact on Turkey's relationship with the Eastern Mediterranean region.

## NEED OF THE STUDY

The Eastern Mediterranean region is extremely pertinent as it is a hub of commerce and trade between Europe and the WANA region and the discovery of major gas reserves off the coasts of Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Cyprus which together accounts for 41% of world's natural gas supply has turned the region into a crucial lifeline of trade and energy as well as a hotbed of geopolitical conflict and competition.

Turkey has emerged as a key regional player in the geopolitics of the region and has been undertaking an increasingly assertive and aggressive policy towards its neighbors which threatens to destabilize the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean, thereby causing a headache for regional and extra-regional powers alike.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative reasoning is used as the methodology to understand and explain the Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics and Turkey's

increasing interests in becoming the dominating regional hegemon over this region as well as factors that drive its interest and the resulting behaviors. The study has also incorporated the relevant arguments based on the existing and diverse literature on the subject.

Primary sources in the form of Turkey's official government website, speeches, press releases, joint statements, etc. are incorporated in the study to understand Turkey's evolving foreign policy in the region. For better understanding of each objectives, secondary sources are also used which include journal articles, occasional papers, reports, policy briefings, books, newspaper articles etc.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The beginning of modern Turkish foreign policy dates back to the humiliating Lausanne Treaty (July 1923) signed between Turkey and the Allied powers that led to the establishment of modern Turkey and the abolition of the Caliphate (Ottoman Empire) in 1924. Although the treaty was welcomed by reformists and liberals like Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the more conservative elements of the country were devastated at the loss of former Ottoman territories and dreamed of preserving the Caliphate to keep Turkey connected to its Islamic Ottoman heritage rather than create a modern Kemalist state. (Tziarras, 2022, p. 30)

The AKP (Justice and Development Party), often considered the de facto successor of the Second Group, has latched onto these unfulfilled desires of its predecessors, termed the Lausanne Syndrome, and is striving hard to revive the remnants of these aspirations. For instance, President Erdogan of the AKP has repeatedly referred to the Lausanne Treaty as the de facto reason Turkey failed to retain its former territories. Turkey's new foreign policy decisions towards the Eastern Mediterranean, especially towards Syria, Libya, Greece, and Cyprus, definitively echo the ghost of the Lausanne Syndrome, albeit in three different, fractured forms- Neo-Ottomanism, Mavi Vatan, and Islamic Revivalism.

Following the electoral victory of the AKP in 2002, Turkey started moving away from its liberal, anti-Islamic, modern and pro-West Kemalist republic to embracing Turkey's lost and neglected ties with its predominantly Islamic WANA (West Asia and North Africa) neighbors, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (due to the fact that all East Med countries- Greece, Cyprus, TRNC, Libya, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria were former Ottoman territories). This soft power engagement with its Arab neighbors was propagated through Ahmet Davutoglu's 'Strategic Depth' doctrine and the resultant 'zero problems with neighbors' policy. Turkey's relationship with its East Med neighbors flourished impeccably during this 'honeymoon period' with Turkey hoping to reinvent itself as a 'bridge between the East and the West.'

However, Turkey's aspirations to become strategically involved with its Islamic neighbors to further its influence over the region through soft power diplomacy quickly got replaced with hard power engagement post the Arab Spring of 2011. Turkey followed twin goals during the uprisings- it publicly called for authoritarian leaders in its neighborhood to step down and support the protestors with the aim to showcase the West that Turkey was the only 'functioning Muslim democracy in the region,' while secretly vying for destabilizing countries like Syria, Libya, and Egypt to establish firm control over these territories. Such hard power aggression of Turkey could be witnessed post the 2016 failed military coup (the military were defenders of the Kemalist Republic) against then Prime Minister Erdogan which resulted in the leadership bringing fundamental changes to Turkey's polity by turning it into a Presidential system, making it more authoritative and effectively bringing the military under its control. Armed with the Lausanne syndrome, hatred for the West (President Erdogan criticized the West for not coming to his rescue during the coup and instead supporting it) and the desire to re-create the lost Ottoman influence, Turkey began getting explicitly and militarily involved in its neighborhood which began with Turkey's invasion of Syria in 2016.

## Key determinants of Turkey's foreign policy in the East Med region

### I. Geography

Turkey's geographic location has been repeatedly stressed as the most significant determinant of its foreign policy by Davutoglu in his 'Strategic Depth' doctrine that dictates Turkey become an active player in its immediate neighborhood. Turkey has also inherited the role of playing a "bridge" that connected Europe, Africa, and Asia. Turkey not only sits on one of the most strategically and traditionally coveted territory of the world that directly impacts its trade, politics, and foreign policy, but it is also located in one of the volatile shatterbelt regions of the world. As a result, Turkey's geographical positioning dictates that it has no choice but to engage with its neighborhood extensively and not detract itself from the developments in the region. (Aydin, 2003)

Turkey is currently embroiled in conflict with its neighbors in the Eastern Mediterranean regarding energy security, which partly stems from its geography. (Aydin, 2003) Other than Greece and Cyprus, Ottoman Turkey has also historically clashed with its Asian and African neighbors, and modern Turkey is no exception. Turkey's Lausanne syndrome has forced it to embark upon re-expanding its territorial boundaries which it did following interventions in both Syria and Libya owing to instability in the region. Such Neo-Ottoman ideas trace its roots to Turkey's geographic location that fuels its geostrategic goals, namely its hegemonic ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Thus, the country's geography has continued to play a dominant role in Turkish foreign policy for centuries.

### II. Neo-Ottomanism

Neo-Ottomanism refers to the emerging ideology of the AKP that encourages Turkey to employ both soft power and hard power diplomacy to reinforce Turkey's influence over its Ottoman-era territories. According to this ideology, Turkey has become increasingly involved in resolving regional and global issues. It positions itself as a 'reformer and transformer' of the entire international order, even going to the extent of proposing concepts like 'the world is more than five' and openly advocating anti-western and anti-US sentiment in both domestic and foreign policy decisions. As such, Turkey has now moved away from an American-centric policy and instead created an 'Erdogan-centric' policy based on the personal ambitions of the leader who has keenly embraced the concept of Neo-Ottomanism as the unofficial basis of Turkey's independent foreign policy. Some significant elements of Neo-Ottomanism include Neo Pan-Turkism (integration of all Turkic states into one unit due to their ethnic, linguistic, and religious affinity realized through economic involvement and social means), Pan-Islamism, and cooperation with Arab, Balkan, Asian, and African countries. (Alekseevich, 2018)

The soft power tools of Neo-Ottomanism can be witnessed in Lebanon and Palestine. In Lebanon, Turkey has tried to entrench its presence at the grass root level through people-to-people diplomacy to awaken the Turkish ethnic pride amongst the Turkmen of Lebanon, Sunnis in disinherited areas of the North, and youths attracted to the 'Turkish model' of a Muslim-majority state where Islam coexists with modernity, economic prosperity, and globalization. (Jabbour, 2021)

Turkey has also used humanitarian diplomacy to further its socio-religious agenda in Palestine by embellishing the country with humanitarian and developmental aid against the backdrop of increased Israeli occupation, especially during the start of the Israel-Egypt Gaza blockade. While Turkey has officially contributed more than \$10 million to the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) in support of Palestinian refugees, the Turkish Red Crescent has provided humanitarian relief of more than \$105 million to Palestine since 1995, including provision of ground teams, patient transport vehicles, and emergency food packages across the Gaza Strip. (TRC, 2021) One benefit of this aid diplomacy pertains to increasing support for 'Turkish model' of governance amongst Palestinian youths.

However, Neo-Ottomanism's explicit hard power role can be witnessed in Syria, Libya, and Cyprus. Let us take the case of Syria. Throughout the 20th century, relations between Turkey and Syria have been plagued by a plethora of problems. These problems include Syrian support for Kurdish separatist militias (PKK), Turkish annexation of the Hatay province in 1939, Turkey's increasing hydro hegemony on the Tigris and the Euphrates, etc. Although relations between the two states bettered following Turkey's adoption of



'zero problems with neighbors' policy, relations soured after the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Syria and the regime's response to it. (Murariu & Anglitoiu, 2020) With the failure of diplomatic resolution between the Assad regime and the opposition backed by Turkey, the rise of ISIS, establishment of Al-Qaeda's Al-Nusra front in Syria, and the removal of Syrian military forces from Kurdish-dominated Northern Syria by the Assad government, resulted in demands of local Kurdish autonomy in Northern Syria. This inadvertently created a huge security concern for Ankara along its southern border. (Seeberg, 2021)

With the 2016 failed military coup re-igniting dormant Neo-Ottoman desires of hegemony, Turkey invaded northern Syria from 24th August 2016 to 29th March 2017 (Operation Euphrates Shield). (Seeberg, 2021) Turkey's agenda was to make sure that the People's Defense Units or YPG (the majority-Kurdish unit of the Syrian Defense Forces) would not be able to control vast areas of Northern Syria along with the PKK. With Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkey's interventions in Syria have continued ever since, with other such operation being Operation Olive Branch of January 2018, through which Turkey, with the help of its Syrian ally, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), invaded and occupied Afrin, the westernmost Kurdish-majority region. A third operation was launched in October 2019, known as Operation Peace Spring. Turkish forces targeted YPG militias in Northern Syria and carved out a 30-km deep "buffer/safe zone" to settle around 3.6 million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey. (Seeberg, 2021)

Turkey's Neo-Ottoman tendencies, especially its militaristic expansionist syndrome in Syria can be best summed up by a speech delivered by President Erdogan in Eskisehir in February 2018- "Those who think that we have erased from our hearts the lands from which we withdrew in tears a hundred years ago are wrong. We say at every opportunity we have that Syria, Iraq, and other places in the geography in our hearts are no different from our homeland." (Seeberg, 2021)

### III. Mavi Vatan

The Blue homeland Strategy, or Mavi Vatan, is a naval doctrine that emphasizes the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean for Turkey's maritime space and naval power. (Tziarras, 2022) The principal aim of the Blue Homeland doctrine is to consolidate Turkey's influence and control over its surrounding seas to raise its regional and international influence and control new energy resources in the region. The chief idea of Mavi Vatan is the belief that Turkey's influence should not just be limited to the land but should also encompass all its nearby seas. In accordance with this, Turkey desperately wants to assert its control over the Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, and even the Red Sea. (Barseghyan, 2021)

Mavi Vatan has three main pillars: first, heavy militarization of Turkish foreign policy which is evident by the country's military presence in Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean region (mainly Syria), deploying armed drones in Cyprus, setting up military bases in Somalia and Qatar, and direct involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020. The second pillar of the Blue Homeland Doctrine includes defense in cross-border areas which directly translates to Turkey's presence of troops and military bases in Cyprus, Libya, Qatar, Somalia, and northern Iraq. A significant manifestation of this pillar in the Eastern Mediterranean includes Turkey's maritime agreement with Libya (the GNA) in 2019 to prove Turkey's right to control Libya's maritime territory while jointly expanding both the state's EEZs. (Barseghyan, 2021) As a result of this treaty, Turkey can control vassal movement, natural gas reservoirs, and pipelines in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. The third pillar is more domestic and includes heavy investments in Turkey's defense industry and has been quite successful in producing combat drones, indigenous rocket systems, and co-producing attack helicopters, tanks, and warships through its MILGEM project. (Barseghyan, 2021)

Turkey is also one of the few countries that have refused to ratify the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and have voted continuously against the Omnibus Resolution of the Law of the Sea, which furnishes regulations on exploiting mineral resources in Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ). Such a policy of not respecting the maritime rights of its neighbors and claiming their maritime sovereignty has put Turkey in conflict with other littorals and regional actors, mainly with Greece and Cyprus. (Barseghyan, 2021)

#### IV. Islamic Revivalism and Pan Islamism

The AKP's electoral success in 2002 pushed Turkey towards re-Islamization of its foreign policy in accordance with its Ottoman roots. Turkey's presidency of the Organization of the Islamic Conference(OIC), the "ownership of the Palestinian cause," its involvement in Islamic countries ranging from Somalia to Qatar to Myanmar, flourishing of relations with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood- all reiterated Turkey's identity as part of the ummah, floated the idea of Turkey as a probable candidate to lead it in the future, and facilitated Turkey's image as "the leader of the Islamic world." (Tabak, 2017)

Some other efforts such as hosting international conferences, humanitarian actions directed towards Muslim Populations, and consolidating ties with Islamist political organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood are all intended to transform Turkey into a hub of Islam. (Engström, 2021) Turkey has also employed specific tools to actively engage with the Muslim communities on the grass-root levels in different parts of Asia and Africa. For instance, it has used the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency and the Presidency for Religious Affairs (Diyanet), and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Relative Communities (YTB) to directly get in touch with the Muslim communities in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. For instance, Diyanet's efforts abroad primarily include building mosques and the appointment of Imams loyal to Turkey. These mosques serve as channels through which Turkey can directly influence Muslim populations abroad and spy on its dissidents, specifically in the aftermath of the 2016 military coup. (Engström, 2021)

Therefore, the use of Islam as part and parcel of Turkish foreign policy has become a key determinant in its engagements with the Arab world.

#### V. Ambitions of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

The main architect of the current Turkish Foreign Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean region is the nation's ambitious, Islamic, and revisionist leader President Erdogan. Inheriting the legacies of the Lausanne syndrome, the Second Group's ideologies, a Neo-Ottoman mindset, a revisionist and Islamist outlook, hunger for more territories, maritime and energy resources, and enraged by the West's betrayal during the 2016 coup, President Erdogan has rapidly transformed Turkish foreign policy from 'zero problems with neighbors' to one that is assertive, militaristic and aggressive, with a combination of both hard power and soft power tactics in his neighborhood. President Erdogan's populist politics at home, armed with anti-dissident rhetoric and propaganda videos of Turkey's glorious Ottoman past has rewarded him with an array of unquestioning and die-hard fanatics who have fully supported Turkey's foreign policy choices in any theatre of the world. President Erdogan has often rallied against what he perceives as an 'unjust' world order and strives to create Turkish centrality in its neighborhood and beyond. As a result, narratives such as 'the world is more than five' or 'Turkey as a leader of the Muslim world' have become increasingly prevalent in recent years, and so has ideas of 'New Turkey' or 'Great Turkey' and 'Turkish Century.' (Robinson, 2022)

Erdogan's vision for transforming Turkey into a regional hegemon can be witnessed in various domestic and foreign policy choices. Erdogan succeeded in forcing the military out of Turkey's domestic politics by 2016, which resulted in him being able to consolidate power by reconfiguring Turkey's institutions. He ultimately brought the country's institutions under his control after replacing the parliamentary system with the presidential system through a hotly-contested referendum in 2017 that promptly brought the military under the President's direct control (the military had more power during the Kemalist period). Following the subjugation of the party's strongest critic (the military), Erdogan began changing Turkey's foreign policy to the direction of his choice. (Robinson, 2022) For instance, from 2016 onwards, the Turkish military has explicitly invaded Northern Syria three times, militarily intervened in Libya to support the internationally recognized GNA government in Tripoli against the forces of warlord Khalifa Haftar, and re-ignited maritime conflicts with Greece and Cyprus, especially over the control of newly-discovered hydrocarbon resources off the Cypriot coast. (Barkey, 2020).

## VI. Energy Security

The final determinant of Turkish foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean region pertains to energy security. Turkey's leadership believes there are several geoeconomic and geopolitical advantages of transforming Turkey into an energy hub, including the exponential growth of the domestic economy and the projection of the state as a key regional hegemon in its neighborhood. However, Turkey does not possess an adequate amount of energy resources and tends to depend on Iran and Russia to meet the country's domestic energy needs. Therefore, the Turkish government has tried to establish various policies that would enable the country to diversify its energy reserves at home, use its 'transit country' position as leverage against its rivals, and use it to maximize the country's national interests and strengthen its hand as a rising regional power. (Iseri & Bartan, 2019)

The recent discovery of 1.7 billion barrels of oil and 3.5 trillion c/m of natural gas in the Levant basin has resulted in intense competition amongst the littorals of the Mediterranean Sea to exploit and control these resources. The discovery of natural gas reserves near the Cypriot coast has pulled Turkey into this craze. The fact that Turkey controls territories in northern Cyprus (TRNC) has led Turkey to believe that it has the right to extend its EEZ in the waters near Cyprus to control and exploit these resources. Such a belief also stems from the Blue Homeland Doctrine, which urges the state to control not just land but also maritime territories in its vicinity. As a result, Turkey sent one exploratory/research ship Oruc Reis to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea in 2020, accompanied by Turkish naval vessels; and a drilling ship Abdulhamid Han in 2022 near the northwest coast of Cyprus.

Turkey's ventures into the Eastern Mediterranean have prompted several littoral states of the region to come together to isolate Turkey and limit its activities as they fear Turkey's ambitions of becoming a regional hegemon will only get emboldened if it manages to exploit and control vast hydrocarbon resources, which in turn would pose a direct threat to these countries, given Turkey's tryst with expansionist, hard power diplomacy. As a result, countries like Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, France, Italy, and Jordan have together formed the EMGF to exploit the region's hydrocarbon resources by excluding Turkey and Syria. Turkey, in turn, signed a maritime agreement with Libya in 2019 to extend its EEZ and jointly exploit the maritime resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, energy security has become another factor that has shaped Turkish foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and will continue to do so in the future.

Therefore, Turkish foreign policy has evolved significantly throughout Modern Turkish history. Modern Turkey under Mustafa Kemal and the subsequent Kemalists advocated for closer relationship with the West while ignoring its relations with the Arab countries. This foreign policy discourse changed progressively with the rise of the AKP in Turkish politics. Armed with the Lausanne syndrome of the Second group, the AKP produced the Strategic Depth doctrine that advocated closer ties with Turkey's Arab neighbors while simultaneously maintaining favourable relationships with its European counterparts through the 'zero problems with neighbors' policy.

However, the Arab Spring and the 2016 attempted military coup changed Turkish foreign policy further which became more assertive and hegemonic. Turkey's current foreign policy has certain key determinants, which include- Neo-Ottomanism (hard and soft power diplomacy), Mavi Vatan (hard power, coercive diplomacy), Islamic Revivalism (soft power, religion-based diplomacy), personal ambitions of President Erdogan, and energy security. Thus, this chapter posits how TFP has significantly evolved throughout the years, especially following the AKP's electoral victories.

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