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Turkey's Rapprochement with Russia: Assertive Bandwagoning

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ABSTRACT

Despite Russia's increasing clout and assertiveness in its region, Turkey has chosen to improve its relations with Russia, rather than balance against it through its Western allies. Turkey's unexpected strategic partnership with Russia is best seen as an example of bandwagoning for profit. It is an assertive bandwagoning with the objective of countering Kurdish separatism, an imminent problem in the Turkish ruling elite's ranking of threat perceptions. The empowerment of Syrian Kurdish groups under the protection of the United States has moved Turkey closer to Russia. A long-term alliance between the two, however, depends on reconciliation of their differences which are deeply rooted in historical and geo-political factors.

KEYWORDS

Turkey; Russia; the United States; Syria; Kurds; assertive bandwagoning

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan describes his relationship with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, as one that is “really special”. Turkey has completed its negotiations with Russia to obtain the S-400 missile system, and a Russian consortium will build a nuclear power plant on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey in a deal that does not involve the transfer of technology or ownership. These are significant military and energy initiatives of enormous strategic magnitude. Yet, just a few years ago, in November 2015, a Russian SU-24 fighter aircraft flying over the Turkish-Syrian border was shot down by a Turkish F-16 warplane, an event that Putin described at that time as “a stab in the back by the accomplices of terrorists”. Thus, the recent deal is an interesting reversal of the relationship. Not only has Turkey normalised its relations with Russia, but Russia has also become Turkey's closest partner in the region. Given that Russia historically occupied the central seat in Turkish security calculations and was perceived as a major threat against which Turkey sought to balance through alliances with Western powers, this recent move is a puzzle that begs explanation.

Turkey's strategic bandwagoning with Russia is best explained by structural factors related to both domestic and international politics. At the centre of this explanation lies Turkey's changing security environment in which Kurdish separatism has returned as the most pressing security threat in the perception of Turkish leaders and in the context of the resurgence of nationalism and securitisation in Turkish domestic politics. Moreover, Turkey feels itself under increased pressure in terms of its security as

a result of the prolonged nature of the conflict in Syria. Since 2016, Turkey has changed its goal in Syria from regime change, which it adopted at the beginning of the Arab Spring, to one of preventing a probable Kurdish autonomous zone.

We argue that the Kurdish question and the increasing differences that Turkey has with its key allies on this issue is the most significant reason why Turkey has been re-adjusting its relations with Russia. However, we also think that this is not a sustainable position for Turkish foreign policy as its entire historical formation has left a legacy in which Turkish and Russian interests diverge. Turkey and Russia have very different interests and objectives stemming from different structural constraints and opposing historically rooted regional alliances in a vast geography stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia. Retuning Turkish foreign policy to its new relationship with Russia will have important repercussions in all these areas of Turkish foreign policy.

The article starts with a discussion of alliance theory in an attempt to locate our question within an appropriate theoretical framework. This is followed by a discussion of Turkey's grand strategy of historical balancing against Russia through alliances with Western powers as implemented during the Cold War. The end of the Cold War meant the removal of Turkey's historical threat, yet it also meant the resurfacing of its old ethnic and religious identity questions, with resulting opportunities and threats. Then came the Arab Spring, one of the most significant turning points in the recent history of the Middle East, completely altering the strategic parameters of the region for both regional and international powers. We discuss the ramifications of the failure of this process for Turkey and the resulting security environment in the context of the Syrian conflict as the principal factor informing Turkish foreign policy towards the United States and Russia. In this context, we tackle the question of how the emergence of the Kurdish threat in the region as well as other important security threats in Turkey's domestic politics distance Turkey from the United States and move it closer to Russia. We conclude with thoughts on the future prospects, that is the feasibility and sustainability of this reorientation.

Alliance theory: balancing vs bandwagoning

Despite expectations that Turkey would be alarmed by Russia's increasing assertiveness in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean region, Turkey has moved closer to Russia, in contrast to its grand strategy of balancing against it. Here, structural realist theories can shed some light on the matter. In his classical conception of the "balance of power", Kenneth Waltz (1979, 118) asserts that states maximise their possibility of survival when no neighbouring country is strong enough to dominate any other, in other words, when their power is balanced. Stephen Walt (1985, 12-3) revised this theory arguing that states do not develop a sense of insecurity simply on account of power capabilities. Rather, states act according to perceived threats. This emphasis on perceptions opens up room for a realist-constructivist synthesis.

Waltz' balance of power and Walt's balance of threat theories are both on alliance formation. They argue that, when under threat (material or perceived), states will usually balance against it. However, Walt's conceptualisation of what constitutes a threat resonates with constructivist thinking in the sphere of international relations

theories. According to Walt (1985, 12-3), one of the factors that shapes a state's threat perceptions is another actor's "offensive intention".

At the same time, interests, identities and threat perceptions are all constructed and ever changing as a result of social interactions among actors (Ruggie 2005). In other words, Walt integrates elements of a socially constructed world as found in constructivist theory into structural realism. Some other theorists, such as Brown *et al.* (2000), criticise Walt on this, claiming that his approach is logically inconsistent whilst diminishing realism with its use of perceptions and other elements usually found in constructivist thinking. Barkin (2003), instead, argues in favour of realist-constructivist compatibility, calling for the creation of a new theoretical approach called "realist constructivism".

In line with this, we believe that a modified balance of threat theory provides a good theoretical framework for explaining Turkey's perceptions of a Kurdish threat in Syria. The way in which Turkey develops its threat perceptions is linked to historical factors that go back to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the way the Turkish national identity was constructed.

Yet, although the balance of threat theory can help understand Turkey's recent international behaviour to some extent, it does not explain everything. Walt's theory falls into the realm of defensive realism and argues that under most circumstances, states will balance rather than bandwagon against threats. Even if they do bandwagon, Walt claims that states do so for defensive reasons as they join the side that is most threatening. As will be explained in the following sections, Russia has historically been one of Turkey's most serious security threats. Hence, Walt's theory cannot explain the whole picture behind Turkey's perceived bandwagoning behaviour, in that the theory assumes that states will take on a defensive posture whereas we hold that Turkey's bandwagoning has been guided by offensive considerations.

In order to see the full picture, realist theories must be brought in that can explain Turkey's offensive posturing towards Syrian Kurdish groups, most specifically the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*, PYD). Even though Walt's theory includes elements that are not commonly found in realism, it has nevertheless been criticised for its omission of domestic variables and idiosyncrasies that could account for bandwagoning behaviour (Kaufman 1992; Barnett and Levy 1991). Randall Schweller (1994) confirms the existence of such variables and argues for a different sort of alliance behaviour.

Defined by some as a neoclassical realist, Schweller creates a typology of states based on their internal dynamics to predict their alliance behaviours. In line with this, he argues that Walt's theory was skewed in favour of balancing due to its faulty equalization of bandwagoning with capitulation (Schweller 1994, 79). Although he acknowledges that states can bandwagon for security and defence as Walt understood it, Schweller introduces another reason: states can be cajoled and co-opted into joining the stronger side, not out of fear, but out of interest or "profit", as he calls it. This would explain Turkey's bandwagoning with Russia in order to position itself offensively against the Syrian Kurds and push back their claims of autonomy and independence. In other words, Turkey wants safer borders as well as greater political and strategic influence in northern Syria, and this has driven it to consider allying with Russia.

Turkey's grand strategy: balancing against Russia

Analysed from a structural perspective, strong geostrategic and historical factors that shaped both Turkey's and Russia's foreign policies (Dugin 2015; Isakova 2005) would make them incompatible as long-term allies. Structural clashes with Russia defined the foreign policy of the Ottoman state during the last few centuries of both empires' existence. As explained by Gökhan Çetinsaya (2017, 5), the most important concern for Ottoman and Turkish statesmen was the regional challenge posed by Russia.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Ottoman Empire lost all of its major wars against Russia, significantly reducing Ottoman influence over the remainder of its Balkan territories. Yet, Russian expansion brought the British and the French to back the empire, providing military and financial assistance. Indeed, the Ottoman Empire's admission into the European family of nations in the 18th century was dictated to a large extent by the threat coming from Russia (Hale 2013, 2-3). Even though the Ottomans' attempt to modernise with the financial and military assistance provided by France and Britain created a situation of dependency on Europe and thus ultimately failed, this strategy prolonged the life of the empire, setting the stage for the Turkish grand strategy that would continue for many decades afterward. Moreover, this feeling of insecurity with respect to Russia shaped the foreign policy of the modern Turkish Republic for much of its history (Millman 2006, 488).

A major source of anxiety for both Ottoman and Turkish leaders has always been Russia's desire to control the Straits in order to gain unobstructed passage into the Mediterranean Sea (Ahmad 2004, 9). The question of the Straits came up after the Second World War when Soviet leader Joseph Stalin wanted common Russo-Turkish control of them (9). Stalin also demanded the return of the two Turkish cities of Kars and Ardahan to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia – demands which Turkey categorically rejected. Even today, access to warm waters continues to play an important part in Russian geopolitical thinking (Delman 2015). Besides providing a faster route to the Atlantic Ocean through the Mediterranean Sea, it would also allow Russia to impose its presence increasingly on Southern and Central Europe.

In order to counter the increasingly assertive Soviet Union following the Second World War, Turkey sought closer relations with the West, of which Turkey's membership in NATO in 1952 was the most significant step towards institutionalisation of this policy (Aydin 1999, 168). In the Cold War alliance system, Turkey served as NATO's easternmost member, bordering directly on the Soviet Union. This position gave Turkey enormous geostrategic importance in US and European security calculations. For example, in 1959, 15 nuclear warhead-carrying Jupiter missiles were deployed on Turkish soil as a first line of defence against the Soviet Union (Kosebalaban 2011b, 75). Throughout the Cold War, Turkey firmly anchored itself in the Western security alliance system. This did not necessarily mean complete synchronization of Turkish and Western foreign policies. Particularly with respect to the Cyprus issue, Turkish foreign policy deviated from the policy of its Western allies, particularly the United States. Furthermore, Turkey also sought a significant economic relationship with the Soviet Union, especially in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, Turkish foreign policy during the Cold War followed the grand strategy of the Ottoman Empire which was to seek balance against Russia.

Making sense of post-Cold War Turkish foreign policy

The end of the Cold War fundamentally altered this security context for Turkey, leading to the emergence of alternative and often conflicting responses in its domestic politics. It set free Turkey's long-suppressed identity issues and brought into question its isolationist mentality.

One of the most dominant identity conflicts Turkey experienced was with its Kurdish minority. After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, sought to model the new nation on a form of Turkish nationalism based on common cultural and religious ties. All non-Turkish Muslim minorities were forced to assimilate into the Turkish national identity (Zurcher 2004). Such nation building quickly generated reactions, which culminated in a series of Kurdish revolts, most notable of which were the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925, the Mt. Ararat rebellion in 1930 and an Alevi sectarian revolt in Dersim in 1937. Even though the Turkish state quickly dealt with these uprisings through military means, they left an important imprint on Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms. Furthermore, the role of the military in addressing these revolts left a lasting legacy in Turkish politics (Olson 2000).

The next series of conflicts came in 1980s with the appearance of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK). Formed in 1978, the PKK adopted Marxist-Leninist revolutionary ideology in its quest for Kurdish independence from the Turkish state (Criss 2008). In 1984, the PKK took up arms, which prompted Turkey to declare it a terrorist organisation, marking the beginning of a conflict that has continued, on and off, until the present (Radu 2018).

Despite the dominance of hardline policies owing to the influence of the Turkish military as a political actor, there were attempts aimed at finding a peaceful solution to the crisis. Most specifically, Turgut Özal, Turkish President from 1989 to 1993, attempted to resolve it through economic and political reforms. Following Özal's death, however, the Turkish military emerged once more as the most powerful actor in politics, toughening its response to a resurgent PKK.

In the foreign policy realm, Turkey was fighting a war against an alleged alliance between Greece, Syria and the Syria-based PKK, which it sought to balance by forging a counter alliance with Israel (Elekdağ 1994). This militarily-imposed foreign policy perspective conflicted with the liberal heritage of Özal, who saw Turkey's future in European integration and democratisation. It also came up against the pro-Islamic perspective of the Welfare Party led by Necmettin Erbakan, who formed a coalition government following his party's electoral victory in the 1995 general elections. However, this government never enjoyed the full support of Turkey's strong Kemalist establishment. The military pressured Erbakan into signing several military cooperation deals with Israel, and eventually forced him to submit his resignation, no longer fully satisfied with his compliance.

The period that lasted from the 1990s to the early 2000s was dubbed a 'lost decade' as it was characterised by highly unstable coalition governments and a stagnant economy. The massive 1994 economic crisis and chronic government inefficiency coupled with the appearance of fresh faces on the domestic political scene eventually led to the collapse of the shaky coalition governments. A younger generation of Islamist politicians led by Abdullah Gül and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan challenged the leadership of the

old guard in the 2002 elections. They adopted liberal economic principles and a foreign policy perspective that was pro-EU membership and globalist in outlook.

The coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) in 2002 was one of the most significant turning points in modern Turkish history. Campaigning on a liberal conservative platform, the AKP obtained a parliamentary majority and brought stability, free from coalitional bickering. The AKP era can be seen as consisting of three periods, each with distinct orientations in Turkish foreign policy.

In the first phase, which lasted from 2002 to 2011, Turkey continued its traditional foreign policy orientation, in which relations with the West were prioritised and membership of the EU was the main focus. Turkey saw this as the best way to solve its long-lasting domestic problems. With the appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu as Foreign Minister in 2009, Turkey focused on playing the role of a central power pursuing economic integration with its Middle East neighbours, particularly Syria, and acting as a mediator in solving conflicts in the region. This policy came to be known as ‘zero problems towards neighbours’ (Davutoglu 2010). At the same time, Turkey’s activism in the Middle East did not contradict its ambition to join the European Union, despite some obvious tensions in the relationship with major EU member countries, particularly Germany and France (Brand 2010). In line with the EU membership process, important reform and democratisation packages were passed in parliament, the most significant of which involved improving the cultural rights of ethnic minorities. This period was marked by a notable improvement in relations with its Kurdish minority.

The Turkish government decided to end hostilities with Kurdish armed movements through what was dubbed the “Kurdish opening” in the summer of 2009 which aimed to integrate Kurdish elements into an overarching democratic initiative in favour of national unity (Candar 2009). This came as the culmination of the integrationist tendencies the AKP government had been pursuing since its early days in power. Even as far back as 2005 Erdogan claimed that the Kurdish question did not pertain only to Kurdish segments of the population but to the entire nation and required a democratic and legal solution (Sabah 2009).

In the second phase, while moving towards economic integration with neighbouring countries, particularly Syria, Turkey was confronted with the Arab uprisings. The Arab Spring (2011-16) shook the foundations of the regional order in the Middle East. Turkey was caught unprepared for this event and faced a major dilemma as to whether it should side with the authoritarian regimes based on its zero-problems approach or whether it should support the popular uprisings. After a brief period of confusion during the Libyan crisis, the conclusion was reached that it would be in Turkey’s best interests for the region to move towards some kind of electoral democracy at the expense of the dictatorships. As Kemal Kirişçi (2011) maintains, the United States, the West, and the Arab popular movements hailed Turkey as a ‘model’ country for the Middle East and fully supported its role as an exporter of these values. Turkey promoted its image as a Muslim electoral democracy in order to bring about change in the region and support governments that would be more sympathetic to its role as a central regional power. Such a transformation would pave the way for the coming to power of moderate

Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, and would also undermine Turkey's regional hegemonic rivals, most notably Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel.

In the meantime, the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations can be explained by both domestic and structural variables. Both the AKP's conservative and liberal democratic orientations clashed with Israel's treatment of Palestinians. Turkey voiced support for the Palestinian question in high-level diplomatic occasions such as the 2009 Davos summit when Erdogan walked away from a panel event which included Israeli President Shimon Peres. In 2010, a Turkish humanitarian flotilla was raided by the Israeli navy on its way to Gaza, causing the death of nine Turkish citizens. Furthermore, Turkey's new role as a model country for Arab states prevented it from achieving any closer political rapprochement with Israel (Oguzlu 2010).

At the same time, conflicts with the Kurds arose again in the domestic arena as early as 2010. Several ceasefires had been made over the years, most notably in 2010 and 2013. Yet, massive Kurdish nationalist protests erupted all over Turkey in reaction to the siege in 2014 of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on Kobane, a Kurdish majority town in Syria, as Kurds blamed Turkey for turning a blind eye to the ISIS attacks. Despite such tensions, Turkey coordinated an operation with the PYD to transfer the tomb of Suleyman Shah, the founder of the Ottoman dynasty, from an ISIS-controlled area to the PYD-controlled part of Syria. Until 2016, diplomatic contacts between Turkey and the PYD continued.

The third period started in 2016. Its main characteristics are the prioritisation of security issues, with an unprecedented nationalist rhetoric uncharacteristic of a AKP government. In this period, the AKP government has abandoned its own synthesis of economic liberalism and social conservatism, replacing it with a new synthesis of conservatism and nationalism. Simultaneously, in the domestic sphere the Kurdish resolution process has been halted while in the foreign policy arena Turkey initiated operation 'Euphrates Shield' intended to expunge ISIS militants from the Syrian town of Jarablus and thereby stop further territorial gains of the PYD allied with the PKK (Ozertem 2017). Hence this third period is a complete reversal of the first two periods, which shared a focus on the basic principles of democratic values.

Until 2016, Turkey maintained its basic orientation in line with the grand strategy established in the period immediately after the formation of the Republic through its alliance with the United States and the West. It also utilised its position under the Western umbrella to extend its standing in the Middle East. However, from 2016 onwards, Turkey began to restructure its orientation. In this third stage, Turkey has acted on its own in security dealings, as its objectives have clashed with those of the United States, most significantly with regard to the Kurdish forces in Syria. Such a dramatic strategic distancing has forced Turkey to move closer to Russia in a way that is unprecedented in Turkish history.

The Syrian conflict and Turkey's altered security concerns

Turkey understood the challenges presented by the Arab Spring but also saw it as an opportunity to expand its sphere of influence in the region. In other words, Turkish promotion of democracy in the region was not empty idealism that Turkey would pursue at any cost, but rather an instrumental and pragmatic strategy reflecting its

conservative democratic norms and values (Kosebalaban 2011a). Yet this strategy went wrong during implementation.

Turkey's ambitious attempt to reshape the regional order traditionally based on authoritarian regimes caused a conflict with other regional powers, most notably Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia perceived the main threats to its security as coming from Iran, as Iran backed regional Shia movements and moderate Islamist movements poised to benefit from the downfall of the regional dictators (Al-Rasheed 2013). At the same time, Saudi Arabia supported the uprising in Syria in order to remove Assad with whom Iran historically had good relations. From the Turkish standpoint, the regime change in Iraq in 2003 coupled with the emergence of Hezbollah's dominance in Lebanon created a massive Iranian sphere of influence that extended all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Yet unlike Saudi Arabia, Turkey did not see Iran as an existential threat and even cooperated with it in certain areas where their interests aligned (Ayoob 2014). Hence, all three regional powers had competing and conflicting visions of the nature of that order and this clash of interests created a situation in which Turkey was unable to coordinate its regional policies with major regional powers.

Furthermore, the very nature of the tug-of-war, particularly over Syria, further destabilised the region, paving the way for the emergence of rival factions with ties to different regional and international actors. In the case of Turkey, the rising power of the PKK-affiliated Kurdish PYD coupled with the growing threat of ISIS presented a major challenge. The intensification of terror attacks by both the PKK and ISIS in major cities in Turkey in 2016 resulted in the dissolution of the Kurdish peace process.

In Syria, this was an even more serious issue for Turkey due to the links between the PYD and the PKK. Since the very beginning of the crisis in 2015, Turkey emphasized the close connection between the Turkish PKK and Syrian PYD, going so far as to see the PYD as a Syrian offshoot of the PKK (Reuters 2018). In the same vein, Turkish Chief of General Staff Hulusi Akar proclaimed that Turkey would not support the arming of Kurdish terrorists under the pretext of their being 'operational partners' against the Islamic State (Kardaş 2018; Özpek 2017). It is clear that Turkish policy towards Syrian Kurds was influenced by its re-emergent security concerns towards any semblance of Kurdish independence claims. The declaration of independence by the Iraqi Kurdish government in 2017 was protested most strongly by Turkey, reversing the warm relationship in which Turkey had heavily invested after 2010.

Bandwagoning with Russia came as a consequence of the collapse of the liberal orientation that the ruling AKP had followed until 2016 in both domestic and international politics, as well as the divergence in strategic priorities with the United States regarding the role of Kurdish groups in Syria. Whereas Turkey began perceiving the Kurds as its main threat after 2016, the United States was more concerned with Bashar Assad and the threat emanating from jihadist groups like ISIS, and actually came to see the Kurdish forces as natural allies against ISIS, an interpretation that Turkey rejected. Furthermore, Turkey was increasingly unable to coordinate its involvement in the Syrian conflict with the United States due to the unwillingness of the Obama administration to project US power in Syria.

Another significant factor in the Turkish disillusionment with the West was its reaction to the military coup in Egypt. While the United States had supported gradual

and peaceful democratic transition during peacetime, it quickly backed away from this stance and returned to its traditional policy of supporting authoritarianism. Erdoğan slammed the coupmakers as “enemies of democracy” and chastised the Western powers who backed it (Benari 2013). Turkey came to note bitterly the duplicity of Western foreign policy towards the Middle East and feared that it could be isolated in the future. Turkey could no longer count on Western powers since they went against Turkey’s attempt to reshape the region on the model of an electoral democracy. Because of the structural constraints in the region and its own lack of material capabilities, Turkey’s attempt to empower democratic elements in the region failed.

Strategic distancing from the United States and rapprochement with Russia

Turkish-Russian relations cannot be analysed without looking at the tension between Turkey and the United States. Since the Iraq War of 2003, when the Turkish parliament refused to allow US troops to pass through its territory, US-Turkish strategic relations had suffered periods of tension. The election of Barack Obama as US President greatly contributed to improving relations on a personal level as Obama named Erdoğan among the leaders with whom he was able to forge “bonds of trust” (*Hürriyet Daily News* 2012). The two leaders’ positions on Arab democratisation were also similar as reflected in Obama’s Cairo speech of 2009 (Obama 2009).

Yet, major differences soon resurfaced, particularly in the context of the later stages of the Syrian war when the Obama administration refused to put “American boots on the ground”, despite the expansion of ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq and the intensification of ISIS terror attacks in Europe (Zenko 2015). Instead, the United States relied on air bombings of ISIS targets and sent special operations units that worked closely with the Kurdish groups against ISIS (Baker *et al.* 2015). The US military operations did not directly target Syrian government forces even when the Assad government crossed Obama’s red line on chemical attacks in 2013. François Hollande, then French president, stated that this was “a missed opportunity that could have changed the course of the war” (*France* 24 2018).

This hesitant stance of the Obama administration paved the way for greater Iranian and Russian military involvement in support of the Assad regime. In contrast to the US position, Syria had greater strategic significance for Russia. Not only is Russia’s only naval base in the Mediterranean located in the port town of Tartus but, during the Arab Spring, Syria presented a bulwark against the tidal wave of democratisation and radical Islam that was threatening Russia and the regimes on its border. Since 2011, Russia had been barring all Security Council resolutions pertaining to military intervention and coordinated removal of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Russian policy towards Syria reflects the changing nature of the post-Cold War international system whereby regional powers are more sceptical towards the idea of military interventions, especially those guided by the principles and wishes of the United States and the European Union (Charap 2013).

After 2011, Russia found a likely regional ally in another revisionist power, Iran (Mead 2014). For various reasons, both of these countries are wary of Western regional designs, especially towards Syria (Charap 2013). They also share a long-term friendship with the current regime that can be traced back to the time of Hafiz al-Assad, Bashar’s

father. The interests of Russia and Iran converge in Syria, which both see as an area of the utmost geopolitical and strategic significance, hence their commitment of resources to protect the Assad government. During the Syrian crisis, the most pressing issue for Turkey became embodied in the Syrian Kurds. The PKK and its proximity to the Syrian government as well as to Kurds inhabiting northern parts of Syria had always been Turkey's top security preoccupation since the formation of the party in the late 1970s (Nimet 1997). After the Syrian conflict started in 2011, Syrian Kurds organised themselves into military factions, the most notable of which were the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), an armed branch of the PYD, which pursues greater autonomy for Kurds in Syria and is affiliated to the PKK (Gruber 2015). Nevertheless, until the 2015 cancellation of the Kurdish peace process in Turkey, Turkey did not confront the PYD, even hosting its leader Salih Muslim in Ankara and Istanbul several times (Özer 2014). An undisclosed Turkish official made the following remark: "It is possible to reconcile with the PYD. There is a huge difference between the ISIS and the PYD. We believe that the PYD is a rational actor that we can take as an interlocutor" (Selvi 2015). In 2016, however, the intensification of PKK terror attacks coupled with the military coup attempt in July of the same year, dramatically altered Turkey's security calculations, and led to the formation of an Islamist-nationalist coalition – after which Turkey perceived the empowerment of Syrian Kurdish groups as an immediate security threat.

Therefore, after 2016, Assad's downfall became a secondary concern for Turkey, as it aimed, rather, to gain ground in Syria to roll back the Kurdish groups (Larrabee 2016). The problem was that the United States had close relations with them, and Turkish options were constrained in terms of relative material capabilities (Thornton 2015). The Russia-Iran axis continued to focus on the survival of Assad, while the Western bloc led by the United States perceived ISIS and similar jihadist groups as the main security threat. In connection to this, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter stated that the Kurds are the most motivated force on the ground against ISIS (Rosen 2015). For Americans, this became clear during the Kurdish defence of Kobane against the onslaught of ISIS forces.

US support for the PYD, while Turkey was doing everything in its power to prevent aid from reaching the Kurdish forces, created a distance between the two NATO allies. The Obama administration's hesitation to put American military on the ground in Syria and its gradual abandonment of support to the armed Arab opposition forced Turkey to carry the weight of supporting the moderate groups in cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However, this task overburdened Turkey and growing differences with Saudi Arabia resulted in a lack of coordination.

The election of US President Donald Trump in November 2016 created a mood of optimism in circles close to the Turkish government, but this soon gave way to major disappointments. The Trump administration not only did not budge on the two problematic areas of the relationship, namely the extradition of Fethullah Gülen and US military support for the PYD, it also opened new ground for confrontations.

Trump had declared his willingness to open a new chapter in US-Russian relations amidst accusations by US intelligence agencies that Russia had meddled in the 2016 US presidential elections (Yourish and Griggs 2018). If tension with Russia was not diminished before a possible US-Russian rapprochement under Trump, Turkey feared

it could face severe repercussions in its regional politics, most importantly the future shaping of the Syrian political map. Moreover, a new crisis erupted with the Trump administration in 2016 on the issue of the arrest in Turkey of Andrew Brunson, accused of assisting the Gülen network and the PKK. Washington imposed several significant political and economic sanctions on Turkey, prompting a severe currency crisis (BBC 2018). Disagreements with the US are neatly summed up in a following statement by Erdogan in 2018:

The United States has repeatedly and consistently failed to understand and respect the Turkish people's concerns. And in recent years, our partnership has been tested by disagreements. Unfortunately, our efforts to reverse this dangerous trend proved futile. Unless the United States starts respecting Turkey's sovereignty and proves that it understands the dangers that our nation faces, our partnership could be in jeopardy Washington's failure to grasp the seriousness of our concerns regarding national security threats emanating from Northern Syria resulted in two military incursions that cut off the so-called Islamic State's access to NATO's borders and removed the YPG militants from the city of Afrin. As in those cases, we will take necessary steps to protect our national interests (Erdogan 2018).

Due to this tension in Syria with its major ally, Turkey became increasingly isolated and exhausted its resources amidst a massive influx of Syrian refugees fleeing to Turkey.¹ Consequently, Turkey was unable to follow through on the principles of regional democratisation and regime change upon which its foreign policy had rested. The United States and its Western allies abandoned Turkey in favour of their own realpolitik calculations. At the same time, due to the involvement of Iran and Russia, Turkey did not have sufficient material capabilities to change its security position. This is where we believe that the balance of threat theory comes in. It provides an additional variable to power relations in explaining state behaviour: threat perceptions. For centuries, the country that Turkey perceived to have the greatest *offensive intentions* towards it was Russia. Yet, in the post-2016 context, the Russian threat was perceived by the Turkish security establishment to be of secondary importance. The spoils of war that Turkey was ultimately aiming for was removal of the Kurdish military presence from northern Syria. This desire manifested itself in the 2018 Turkish siege on the Kurdish Syrian city of Afrin, as mentioned by Erdogan, which is within the Russian-dominated sphere of Syria. Russia's acquiescence in Turkey's military operation signified a divergence from its previous stance whereby it barred any unilateral Turkish action on Syrian territory via its control of the Syrian airspace. Thus, Turkey aligned itself with Russia in order to achieve an offensive position vis-à-vis the Syrian Kurds.

This marks a return to a more resolute and determined foreign policy toward neighbouring countries (Dalay 2016). Under the conditions in which the United States firmly backed the PYD and Saudi Arabia regarded the fall of Assad as its ultimate objective, the only way Turkey could achieve its main security priority was through strategic cooperation with Russia. Turkey's perception of Kurdish autonomy in its neighbouring countries as a threat explains its bandwagoning with Russia in order to prevent the Kurds from consolidating power in northern Syria is firmly tied to the historical construction of Turkish nationalism. Domestic variables also account for

¹The total number of Syrian refugees eventually reached 3.5 million by 2018 (McKernan 2018).

Turkey's relations with Russia with the historical construction of their respective domestic identities explaining their precarious relationship and threat perceptions (Torbakov 2017). When these factors are taken into consideration, Turkey's bandwagoning with Russia for profit can be understood.

Concluding remarks

This article has explored why Turkey has chosen to move closer to Russia in significant strategic issues, despite Russia's increased power in the regions encircling Turkey. The question presents a puzzle as it contradicts Turkey's grand strategy of the last two centuries, whereby the Ottoman Empire and Turkey confronted an assertive Russia by seeking alliances with Western powers. We have responded to this question using factors at the domestic and regional levels, in the framework of a modified realist theory of alliances.

We believe that the sudden empowerment of the PKK-linked Kurdish groups in Syria as a consequence of the Syrian conflict provoked Turkey's nationalist sensitivities built on memories of territorial disintegration, commonly referred to as the Sevres syndrome. Turkey's threat perceptions regarding the Kurdish issue, as well as its offensive posturing in favour of countering it overcame those of a Russian threat. Given that the United States, Turkey's security ally under NATO, is the principal power protecting and supporting the Kurdish groups in Syria, the very groups that Turkey considers linked to the PKK, Turkey has had to move closer to Russia to obtain permission to conduct what it sees as necessary ground operations. We believe that this amounts to bandwagoning, which means going with the threat rather than against it. However, the strategic goal of Turkey's bandwagoning with Russia is balancing against the threat of Kurdish separatism.

In this article, we focused on political variables and structural changes in Turkey's regional and domestic security environments, more specifically, the empowerment of the PKK-linked Kurdish groups during the Syrian conflict. We believe that this threat for Turkey cannot be understood merely as an external issue as it is linked with Turkey's domestic politics. Thus, in this sense we believe that the black box of the state needs to be opened up. For Turkey, close cooperation with Russia was necessitated by the Turkish state's perception of the emerging Kurdish separatist threat as a greater and more imminent threat than the one posed by Russia. Turkey turned towards Russia in the context of closer US cooperation with the PYD.

Yet what remains to be answered is why the ruling elite in Turkey which initiated the most comprehensive democratisation reforms and a peace process with the Kurdish nationalists, returned to the Turkish state's old sensitivities and reflexes. It is quite ironic that the Justice and Development Party's leadership, who steered the country's foreign policy decisively in a liberal direction to obtain full membership in the EU and embarked upon the improbable process of democratisation in the entire Middle East, has embraced nationalist discourse once again and a return to securitisation of foreign policy.

For a complete answer to this puzzle, we had to bring the issue to the level of Turkish domestic politics, exploring the events that took place in the last few years and analysing changing political alliances. This further convinced us of the need to adopt

an eclectic analysis that bridges not only the domestic and international levels, but also realism and constructivism. We believe that Turkey's rapprochement with Russia is strategic and assertive, designed to counter the Kurdish threat, rather than merely a passive reaction to powerlessness. At the same time, because of its profit-oriented nature, it is highly unlikely that Turkey's position represents a permanent repositioning away from its historical Western alliance and towards a new, more sustainable strategic alliance with Russia.

Our prediction is that Turkey's deep security concerns regarding Russia will remain and may cause another shift if Turkey can find a stable alternative source of power to balance against the resurgence of Kurdish separatism. A strategic alliance between Turkey and Russia fundamentally contradicts the historically-rooted culture of insecurity and the geopolitically-rooted interests of both countries in a number of regions extending from the Balkans to the Middle East, from the Black Sea region to Central Asia. The most fundamental difference between the two is their overall vision regarding the future shape of the regional order in the Middle East.

Even though Turkey's strategic priorities have shifted from democracy promotion in the Middle East to prevention of Kurdish autonomy or independence in Iraq and Syria, which for some observers amounts to normalisation and for others to a paradigm shift in Turkish foreign policy, this positioning itself depends on the composition of the ruling elites in domestic politics. At the same time, despite their own authoritarian tendencies, the current ruling elites in Turkey still appear to subscribe to a view that their interests are best served if the existing political order in the Middle East, centred on authoritarian regimes, is transformed into one based on elected conservative governments that protect their existing political boundaries. This is evident in their ties with opposition movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and their tensions with major autocracies in the region including Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Russia, however, remains firmly committed to the status quo in which dictatorial regimes dominate and has demonstrated its commitment by forging strategic ties not only with Syria, but also with post-coup Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, on the very issue of Kurdish separatism, Russia's position is the farthest removed from that of Turkey, as Russia does not recognise the PKK as a terrorist organisation and maintains ties with both the PKK and the PYD.

Finally, the future of Turkish-Russian relations fundamentally depends on the future of Turkish-American relations. If the roadblocks that caused the tension in US-Turkey relations can be removed, then Turkey's reliance on Russia will not be so strong. Trump's surprise decision to pull all US troops out of Syria, if implemented, will potentially have major effects on both Turkish-Russian and Turkish-American relations. Yet Turkey's strategic rationale for bandwagoning with Russia with the goal of preventing any future Kurdish independence in Syria is likely to survive the American withdrawal.

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