

**EVOLVING GEOPOLITICS OF THE GLOBAL COMMONS IN TURKEY:
MARITIME POLICY, ENERGY SECURITY, AND REGIONAL DIPLOMACY
2016-2021**

by
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Abstract

Research Question: *Why have maritime domains become of heightened importance for Turkey between 2016 and 2021? What factors have shaped Turkey's Blue Homeland maritime policy?*

This research explores the significance of Turkey's Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) maritime policy through the lens of neoclassical realism by investigating the impact of geopolitics and domestic-political factors on foreign policy outcomes. Using process tracing, the research uncovers motivations behind the policy change between 2004 and 2021 with a particular focus on the last five years, the period when Turkey's naval assertiveness reached its peak following the failed coup attempt in 2016. The argument highlights that Blue Homeland is an extension of Turkey's national self-conception embodied in the *Vatan* concept; it is the manifestation of a traditional land power claiming its place as an emergent maritime power. The government has reinforced an activist maritime policy since 2016 due to pressures of regional insecurity, domestic coalition logrolling, and nationalist sentiment. As opposed to arguments for purely offensive motives or identity projection, the holistic analysis of structural factors, systemic stimuli and the domestic-political context under the neoclassical realist paradigm provides a more nuanced and compelling account of the policy trajectory. Intense foreign pressure, changes in relative distribution of power, and greater immediacy to act form the base line of structural factors / systemic stimuli. These external factors moderated by an assertive, *realpolitik* strategic culture, an authoritarian government, and stronger nationalist sentiment culminated in a policy re-orientation toward securitization. The quest for maritime control is a key pillar of this policy for defending vital interests from afar and projecting power to the near abroad. In the outcome, geopolitical shifts and the AKP's nationalist turn changed Turkey's threat perception, gave a political dimension to Blue Homeland, and brought it into a central place in Turkish politics after 2016. Despite the

political reshuffle and rhetorical descent since 2021, Blue Homeland has a powerful socialized definition and a popular appeal across the political spectrum that positions it as a viable long-term strategy.

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List of Acronyms

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area-Denial
AKP	Justice and Development Party
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
AUKUS	Australia, UK, US Maritime Alliance
BCM	Billion Cubic Meters
BLACKSEAFOR	Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CHP	Republican People's Party
CS	Continental Shelf
East Med	Eastern Mediterranean
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
ELIAMEP	Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy
EMGF	Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum
EPDK	Energy Market Regulatory Authority in Turkey
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
GNA	Government of National Accord in Libya
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IEA	International Energy Agency
IMO	International Maritime Organization
IOC	International Oil Company
IPC	Istanbul Policy Center
ITLOS	International Tribunal on Law of the Sea
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party
MİT	Turkish National Intelligence Agency
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
RoC	Republic of Cyprus
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Command Europe
STANAVFORMED	Standing Naval Force Mediterranean
TCM	Trillion Cubic Meters
TPAO	Turkish Petroleum Corporation
TRNC	Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
US	United States of America
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USGS	United States Geological Survey

Chapter 1: Introduction

On April 3, 2021, 104 retired admirals issued a controversial public statement against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s alleged plan to revoke the landmark Montreux Convention (1936) that governs passage through the Turkish Straits and the Black Sea regime.¹ The open letter criticized Erdoğan’s ambitious “Istanbul Canal” project to build a 45-km man-made waterway on the west of the Bosphorus, urging the AKP government to preserve the delicate balance encoded within the Montreux regime. While the government pundits dismissed the statement as a mere “coup plot,” the letter received mixed responses from the public, with many wondering the reason why the admirals issued it at that point in time. Just a few days later, when the planned deployment of two US warships to support Ukraine against Russia in a conflict over the Donbas region was cancelled at the very last minute, many expressed further curiosity concerning the significance of maritime diplomacy in the Black Sea. Although US navy ships routinely enter the region in support of NATO missions, Russia regarded this incident as a blatant provocation by Washington to agitate further tensions. Russian President Vladimir Putin, on a phone call with his counterpart Erdoğan, swiftly underscored the importance of preserving the Montreux regime even though Putin does not possess official veto power over the passage of foreign warships to the Black Sea. The Kremlin’s call echoed the letter of the admirals six days after its publicization, stressing the “importance of preserving the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits with a view to ensuring regional stability and security” (Russia 2021). Erdoğan quickly shifted the narrative, confirming that “Turkey abides by Montreux until it finds a better alternative” (BBC News Türkçe 2021a).

¹ The Montreux Convention (1936) governs the regime of Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits in Turkey and regulates the passage of ships. While guaranteeing free transit of commercial vessels at peacetime, it restricts the number, displacement, and transit time of naval vessels between the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. The applicable criteria are based on a flag-bearer ship’s home nation. The convention prohibits the presence of naval vessels from non-littoral states in the Black Sea for over twenty-one days. It grants Turkey the contingency to close the straits at times of war or threat of war.

In June 2021, another flashpoint near Crimea involving the British warship HMS Defender and Russian forces also underscored the political salience of maritime diplomacy for Turkey and the region. The warship, part of a NATO naval task force participating in Operation Sea Guardian for counter-terrorism missions, was harassed by Russian aircraft and coastguard vessels a short distance away from the Crimean peninsula as it passed through Ukrainian territorial waters (Gorenburg 2021). The deep-water port of Sevastopol in Crimea is the main naval facility of Russia – a crucial enabler of its activist posture that serves as a springboard for rotations to and from the Syrian port of Tartus. Several months later, the region drew attention in December due to the rising tensions between Ukraine and Russia and the latter’s alleged preparations for an impending invasion. In a major maritime escalation, Russia effectively applied a partial naval blockade on Ukraine to compel the Kyiv government to officially rule out its future NATO membership (Dickinson 2022). Lastly, Russia’s recognition of the breakaway Donbas region’s independence and the pre-emptive strike on Ukraine in February 2022 marked what some analysts label as “the end of the post-Cold War era” (Wright 2022). Notably, the Turkish Straits gate the entrance to the Black Sea’s strategic ports and rich sources of hydrocarbons that carry the potential to transform the region into a potential maritime flashpoint much like the Persian Gulf. The geopolitical rivalry to control waters of the wider region at times of uncertainty and the need to maintain navigation rights through critical chokepoints are illustrative of Turkey’s pivotal role in the region. As the world focused on Turkey’s response to the crisis in Ukraine, maritime diplomacy became a litmus test of Ankara’s larger geostrategic orientation regarding the West/NATO and Russia.

In this context, Ankara’s assertive posture to seal its maritime defense concept called the “Blue Homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*) serves as a testament to its heightened interest and rising stakes in regional security, energy economics, and the broader quest to yield political influence.

Specifically, Blue Homeland defines geographic boundaries of Turkey's maritime rights and interests in the surrounding seas – Aegean Sea, Black Sea, and the Mediterranean, which cover 463,000 km² of surface area. This concept emerged in 2006, underpinned by a republican-era strategic tradition that defines maritime interests and jurisdiction zones around Turkey. Similar to the incident with the open letter, for naval officers at the time of Blue Homeland's development, the trigger to act corresponded with anxieties in Ankara over competing claims for jurisdictions in the Eastern Mediterranean and NATO's strategy to expand its presence in the Black Sea via Operation Active Endeavour. However, this concern did not particularly hold practical significance to the adoption and implementation of Blue Homeland, and it remained neglected in the political circles of the government until after the failed coup attempt in 2016.

For a decade following the establishment of the maritime concept, official state policy mandated the sustenance of the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and the preservation of the Montreux regime in the Black Sea. The policy also outlined a compulsory obligation to avoid adopting any proactive stance in regional disputes involving maritime zones. Instead, Turkey exerted soft power diplomacy and projected the Islamist identity of the governing AKP to further its regional interests. Before the ascension of the Blue Homeland policy, the AKP relegated maritime strategy to naval policy planners who developed capabilities primarily to protect offshore energy rights with the support of Operation Peace Shield (2006), conduct anti-piracy missions under Operation Allied Protector in the Arabian Sea (2009), and project power within NATO's standing task forces such as Operation Unified Protector in Libya (2011). Despite its regional activism, the AKP government pressed relatively few claims until 2016 to assert its maritime rights in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, as opposed to other littoral states such as Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel.

It was only after 2016 that the original concept of Blue Homeland materialized as a symbol of naval advancement and a geopolitical roadmap to secure the maritime periphery of Turkey. The current strategic goal of the policy is to elevate maritime geopolitics by demarcating zones of national jurisdiction and implementing a defensive outer ring around Turkey's periphery against rival alliances in the region. The naval strategy has shifted the focus on defending the Continental Shelf (CS)/Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), implementing the goal of transitioning into a power-projecting, middle-size regional force. This strategy reflected Ankara's wider activist foreign policy and its persistent use of the navy as a tool of coercive diplomacy in multiple conflict theatres such as Cyprus, Libya, and Syria. One must ponder why Turkey, since 2016, has emphatically adopted a relatively more independent, militarized foreign policy of coercion and has institutionalized an assertive maritime strategy for forward defense. Over the past half-decade, the navy's ascendant position, presence, and visibility have supported Turkey in claiming a larger geopolitical posture and autonomously engaging in conflicts overseas with great assertiveness. The Maritime Demarcation Agreement (2019) signed between Turkey and the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, Libya is regarded as the landmark case of this new strategy.

To compound the circumstances even further, tensions rose in 2020 when Ankara sent seismic research and drilling vessels to waters contested in sovereignty with Greece and the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), laying a powerful claim on offshore energy rights. Neglected by public view until 2019, the tiny 12 km² Greek island of Kastellorizo located within a mile from the coast of southwestern Turkey has become the centerpiece of a multi-dimensional dispute over maritime control and energy rights. Meanwhile, Turkish naval shipyards have extended their capabilities to build warships with larger input from the indigenous defense industry to become self-reliant in

terms of operational needs outside of NATO's mandate. Such activism is key to a puzzling picture that stands in stark contrast with the relatively harmonious operation mode under the NATO umbrella from the previous decade. In support of the policy upgrade in Turkey, there also exists an axis shift toward a balanced approach between the US/NATO and Eurasia. As the incident with the admirals' letter and the others briefly outlined above suggest, the Black Sea continues to be an arena for geopolitical contestation between NATO and Russia, wherein Turkey is in a precarious position such that it must balance its position between these competing centers of power to maintain its maritime interests. As evidence of its renewed attitude of assertiveness, Turkey identified more expansive claims over the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.

The activism in Turkish foreign policy also extends to North Africa, the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf. The country's strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with the islands of the Indian Ocean, for instance, may lead to new circumstances of power dynamics in the Indo-Africa sphere (Baruah 2021), an unthinkable event in the early 2000s. It is important to recognize that Turkey is the heir to a classic territorial empire that rested along a thriving overland Silk Road route. This makes up the remaining part of the puzzle of Turkey's dramatic foreign policy reorientation: as a traditional land power, Turkey now claims its position as an emerging maritime power. To be qualified thus necessitates the capability to protect and utilize areas of maritime jurisdiction (Takeda 2014); operationalize a fleet of more than one hundred naval vessels at sea (Murphy 2020, 42); and to project power beyond anti-area/access-denial (A2/AD) bubbles in coastal waters. Being a middle-size country and a key member on the easternmost flank of the NATO alliance, Turkey is in a tumultuous region marked by tense geopolitical rivalries, including difficult borderlands and hostile neighbors. As a peninsular country on the boundary between civilizations, trade routes, and strategic waterways, it has long served as an important player in

energy geopolitics, acting as a transit route, a lucrative market, and an explorer all at once. The country's 8,333 km long coastline is 2.8 times greater than its land borders (totaling up to 2,949 km) ("Land & Water Resources" 2012), which would enable Turkey to act as a transregional maritime hub. Yet, while the country possesses the longest coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has traditionally remained a land power with an army that ranked above the navy within the bureaucratic hierarchy of the defense establishment.

1. Research Question

This research seeks to explain the rising significance of the global commons for Turkey by employing the maritime domain as an empirical window to view Ankara's securitization of foreign policy since 2016. Existing explanations of Turkey's policy shift toward an assertive standpoint particularly focus on regional power politics, energy insecurity, and domestic-political interests to decipher elements that shape maritime policy and support understandings of their positions in the context of the country's foreign relations. The chosen window for analysis reflects the richness of the topic, available empirical data, and the opportunity to carve a niche perspective that dives deeply into Turkey's evolving position in its regional security architecture from multiple perspectives. The research questions of this study are: "Why did the maritime commons take on heightened importance for Turkey between 2016 and 2021? What factors shaped Turkey's Blue Homeland maritime policy?" The study tackles these questions by examining the evolution of maritime policy over three time periods – 2004-2010, 2010-2016, 2016-2021 – with a particular focus on the last five years. The choice of these temporal dimensions reflects important turning points in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy considerations. The comprehensive approach allows a comparison of changes in policy across time, outlining the significance of each contributing factor explained below in relation to the policy choices pursued. The goal of this study

is to unpack the causal factors that underpin Turkey's maritime activism, explore the intentions behind this particularly important strategic shift, and thoroughly explain the reasons for its significance during the time.

2. Argument

This study argues that Turkey's Blue Homeland initiative is defense-oriented, in stark contrast with arguments that claim offensive motives. To explain this initiative, the research probes the interactions of international pressures with domestic political developments in strategic culture, state-society relations, and institutional arrangements, which collectively contributed to the establishment of Blue Homeland during the period between 2004 and 2021. At the systemic level defined by its ordering principle of anarchy and distribution of material capabilities among sovereign states in a multipolar world, the research examines the heightened intensity of external pressures and perceived regional insecurity as the primary explanatory element underpinning the policy change in Turkey. The research attributes explanatory power to and focuses the inquiry at the domestic level on intervening causal factors that moderate structural factors contributing to the outcome. These unit-level processes that condition policy adoption and implementation are characterized as the perpetuation of strategic culture, authority embedded in domestic political institutions, and aspects of interactions between various societal/economic groups and the state. By applying this framework, the study traces how systemic pressures are translated into unit-level factors and how Turkey interprets and responds to its external environment. Based on the timeline of events in the period under examination, the argument here also accounts for "variation in the timing, the intensity, and the specific components" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 143) of the maritime strategy pursued.

The primary argument is Blue Homeland is an extension of Turkey's self-conception as a nation-state in the maritime domain. This is principally a foreign policy response to perceived insecurity due to higher clarity of foreign threats against existing maritime interests and immediacy to act for defending these from afar. Such interests consist of control over maritime jurisdiction zones, access to resources therein, and situational awareness to monitor naval activities in the neighboring regions. As a case of the nationalization of global commons, it represents a political manifesto that declares seas as a core component of the country's vital interests. At this juncture, it is important to emphasize that this strategy does not exist in a vacuum rather, it is part of the broader policy orientation designed to re-define Turkey's concept of *Vatan* (homeland), such that, in contrast to the previous era between 2004 and 2016, it extends beyond the territorial mainland to include zones of national interest in its periphery that fall under global commons, such as the seabed, air space, and cyberspace. The extension of this concept ensures that CS/EEZs may assimilate into Turkey's core interests on par with the land territory. Although decision-makers at the helm of Turkish foreign policy consider the evolution of maritime commons as a strategic initiative and advocate their regulation under the guardianship of international law, this does not preclude the AKP government from intensifying an existing impulse toward greater national self-sufficiency. Blue Homeland is a cornerstone of the nationalist inclination in domestic politics to securitize foreign policy. As part of a more general tendency to claim a greater share of the global commons, the Turkish government frames securitization of the maritime realm as an opportunity to increase geopolitical leverage, gain national prestige, and sustain the AKP's political legacy. The AKP appreciates the political capital of the concept to fend off domestic criticism against regional isolation, leveraging it as a legitimation strategy for its activist foreign policy since 2016.

According to the findings, Blue Homeland re-emerged, at the systemic level, as a top-down policy response to the comparatively more restrictive strategic environment² around Turkey that presents higher clarity and immediacy of threats to its vital interests than in the earlier period of 2004-2016. These interests, which include demarcation and defense of the CS/EEZ, have gained higher priority due to Turkey's greater material capabilities, the rising intensity of threat vectors against its security, and the quest for agency in a chaotic region. The long-term goal of Turkey is to achieve strategic autonomy by "reducing its dependency on the West and charting an independent foreign policy" (Dalay and Keyman 2021). This is a way to maximize its security as a pivotal country located between the competing poles of great powers, and the re-emergence of Blue Homeland should be grasped in this context. Emboldened by the rise of its relative power, what changed since 2016 is the heightened intensity of Turkey's actions to signal resolve and expression of conflictual positions in the context of national sovereignty within a restrictive strategic environment. More intensive 'perceived regional insecurity' and 'immediacy to act' form the baseline of systemic stimuli that exacerbated a strategic policy re-orientation toward securitization of foreign policy. Process tracing shows that a combination of structural and domestic factors determines the intensity of policy responses to systemic stimuli. Under favorable structural conditions and in the presence of less clarity of threats in addition to relatively constrained domestic political scenarios between 2004 and 2010, Turkey adopted an alternative, *idealpolitik* strategic culture, and under-balanced its challengers via appeasement. Facing adverse strategic circumstances, high clarity of threats, and a gradually less constrained domestic political scenario, Turkey shifted back to the dominant, *realpolitik* strategic culture after 2016 until hard

² Terms such as "restrictive strategic environment," "domestic constraints," "external/internal balancing," and "under/over-balancing" used herein are part of the theoretical language of the realist IR tradition. These are specified and contextualized in Sections 1 of Chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

power policy peaked and over-balanced its adversaries with the purchase of S-400 air defense missiles from Russia. Following this, on the back of an emergent hybrid Turkish-Islamic/nationalist strategic culture and a coalition of domestic interest groups, Turkey has partially backtracked from the Blue Homeland rhetoric since 2020 due to diminishing returns in pursuing this policy, reaching a *détente* in its relations within the region. Particularly, the EU's threat of economic sanctions compounded by the country's exacerbating regional isolation and ensuing geopolitical risks allowed the AKP to re-align its foreign policy discourse and rein in Blue Homeland. Thus, the intensity of Turkey's policy response varies in accordance with the external pressures/incentives and moderating factors in domestic politics.

Among domestic-level intervening factors that moderate Turkey's long-term policy response to its environment, the continuity of a strategic culture demands due consideration. In this context, there is a persistent culture with Kemalist roots that adapts to changing circumstances and retains its core assertive, *realpolitik* characteristic. This culture advocates for Turkey to protect its territorial integrity and survival under the *Misâk-ı Millî* (National Oath) borders originated in 1920s during the Independence War, to achieve self-sufficiency in maritime modernization, and to earn its deserved place as a maritime nation. The source of this culture can be traced to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's state-centric vision to secure and defend the republic's survival within its current borders.³ To contextualize Turkey's sensitivity over sovereignty issues, observe how the escalation of the Cyprus Problem and Aegean Disputes since the mid-1960s ushered in the development of an indigenous naval industry complex, accumulation of hard-power capabilities, and provisioning of legal instruments to tackle challenges overseas. This incremental growth of aggregate

³ Kemalism is Turkey's founding ideology. The set of ideas and objectives attributed to Atatürk's path in Kemalism include preservation (*bekele*) of the state and full independence (*tam bağımsızlık*) (Demirtaş Bagdonas 2008, 29–31). As elaborated in Chapter 4, these ideas have causal relevance for the emergence of Blue Homeland.

capabilities and naval traditions contributed to Blue Homeland's culmination as a symbol of Turkey's maritime rights in the mid-2000s. Hence, the primary domestic driving force of the shift since 2016 is the return to this strategic culture, which positions regime survival (*beka*) at the center of an activist foreign policy supported by military interventionism. As the government faced high threats, short horizons, and restricted choices since 2015, the *realpolitik* culture embedded in Turkey's historic roots re-emerged as a more relevant moderating factor to inform foreign policy options than ideological streams in domestic interest groups.

Aside from the persistent strategic culture, domestic institutional amendments, and coalitions of interest groups in state-society relations significantly inform the timing of Blue Homeland's rise. The failed coup-attempt in 2016, the AKP's subsequent erosion of Turkey's institutional memory, and the centralization of power in the executive presidency altogether offered a fertile breeding ground for the reverberation of nationalist rhetoric surrounding the symbolic legend of defending the *Vatan* (homeland) concept. This narrative supports the Turkish-Islamic synthesis model semantically positioned close to the *Millî Görüş* (National Vision) tradition, out of which the AKP emerged. This provided an interface to consolidate contrasting political fragments under its banner. Additionally, Erdoğan's quest to strengthen his executive political career and interest group logrolling with new partners after 2015 allowed for further legitimacy to be attributed to Blue Homeland. First, the AKP opportunistically stoked nationalism with its coalition partner, the MHP, following which it formed a tacit alliance with Kemalist/*ulusalcı*-Eurasianist cliques in the defense bureaucracy. Then, it instrumentalized Blue Homeland to deal with domestic concerns in the backdrop of growing criticism concerning regional isolation since 2016. As the leadership employed and manipulated the Kemalist strategic culture to justify their decisions and deflect criticism, the resultant atmosphere elevated Blue Homeland as the symbol of Turkey's agency and

self-preservation. This domestic consensus regarding an activist foreign policy was later the foundation to project power and demarcate maritime jurisdictions for survivability in a chaotic regional order. The proposition here augments Taliaferro et al.'s neoclassical realist model, suggesting that ideational factors such as the legitimation of foreign policy decisions concerning the defense of *Vatan* may operate as sources of power. It also demonstrates how legitimation can be a policy instrument aimed at the domestic audience as well as external interlocutors.

The proposed framework above remains in contrast to earlier monocausal explanations that relied solely on the political economy of energy supply security. Before 2016, several state officials including the Chief Admiral (Ret.) Bülent Bostanoğlu regarded Turkey's maritime threat perception in contested zones as "energy-based" (Tanchum 2014). Admiral (Ret.) Cihat Yaycı, a forebearer of the Blue Homeland concept, also claimed that "Blue Homeland's main driver is access to energy deposits" (TRT Haber 2021a). This study argues that the rise of this hard-power-oriented, forward-defense strategy since 2016 is the culmination of a complex mosaic of domestic political imperatives, perceived regional insecurity, and quest for maritime control, instead of being solely dependent on energy rights. The research illustrates that although access to potential offshore energy deposits was the chief driver of Blue Homeland's emergence in the mid-2000s, Turkey's strategic priority has since evolved from energy exploitation to encompass rising geopolitics in maritime commons. Prospects for access to energy deposits are still crucial for underscoring geo-economic gains, reducing coercive vulnerability to foreign suppliers (Kelanic 2016, 181), and supplementing a bolder geopolitical posture. Although energy security is an important political-economic factor in the rhetoric established by the AKP, due to the changing energy landscape and rising concerns about climate mitigation (Öğütçü int 2021), Turkey is no longer predisposed to adopt a confrontational approach solely for offshore energy rights in

disputed maritime zones such as the Eastern Mediterranean. The securitization of energy acts as a force multiplier that attributes popular legitimacy to Blue Homeland rather than offering a causal factor underpinning its significance.

To apply the proposed framework to empirical research, the study employs qualitative data collection methods of in-depth expert interviews that have been supported by secondary resources both online and offline. To further understand the motivations that underpin the strategic shift in the post-2016 period, the study also utilizes document analysis and visual inquiry of videos distributed via the Internet by think tanks, government officials, media outlets, and progenitors of the Blue Homeland concept. The twofold analytical scheme on systemic and domestic levels outlined above provides the organizing framework for this research. As some of the progenitors of the concept refer to theoretical language in a video interview (*BBC News Türkçe* 2020), the main reason for applying this framework is to explain the shift in a more detailed manner by exploring a wider variety of causal logics than simply the systemic stimuli that are associated with the significance of Blue Homeland. Although the structural layer of analysis provides a useful baseline, this study augments the inquiry by drawing implications from neoclassical realism to closely examine both the international and the domestic context. It considers not only the distribution of material capabilities but also perceptions of relative power by domestic actors as determinants of foreign policy choices. Therefore, this research is based on a holistic approach rather than a monocausal one to explain Turkey's maritime activism. Overall, by applying a neoclassical realist framework to the Turkish government's policy decision to forebear the rise of Blue Homeland since 2016, the research explores causal factors to explain the underlying political, ideational, and security interests associated with the maritime domain.

3. Outline

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The introductory section offers context, defines the research question, and summarizes the findings of the study. The literature review in Chapter 2 consists of a critical analysis of the main scholarly publications that discuss changes in Turkish foreign policy and maritime geopolitics. The review sets forward political, economic, and legal arguments for and against the emergence of the Blue Homeland maritime policy in Turkey. In essence, it reviews information from extant literature regarding maritime geopolitics and the case of Turkey to thematically discuss relevant debates, identify gaps in the literature, and develop a niche area for original contribution to the topic. Chapter 3 presents the research design, theoretical approach, and methods of data collection and analysis employed to address the research question. It explains how the thesis intends to answer the given context and provides the rationale for the design and methods utilized. The chapter identifies and contextualizes some of the theoretical language used in the realist IR literature to supplement the brevity of the argument. Therein is a proposed theoretical model based on the neoclassical realist paradigm, potentially applicable to the universe of authoritarian-centralized emerging maritime power cases such as Russia, China, and Iran. The chapter also offers certain ideas for future research that may refine the argument and provide additional insights.

This is followed by Chapter 4, which examines the evolution of Turkey's Blue Homeland policy by applying process tracing to the data gathered from the early republican era until 2004. Through a historical lens, the chapter analyzes the interaction between structural factors and domestic politics that have shaped Turkey's maritime strategy and set precedent for the emergence of Blue Homeland after 2004. It traces the persistence of a strategic culture by examining historical sources of information to discern whether if and how it contributed to the foreign policy decisions

under the shifting priorities of national security. It also describes the political significance of the term *Vatan* in its historic context and its relevance to present-day politics using empirical evidence of its extension into domains outside of Turkey's territorial borders.

In Chapter 5, the neoclassical realist framework outlined in Chapter 3 is applied to explain Blue Homeland's status as the leading concept and symbol of Turkish maritime policy since 2004. Section 1 on "Liberalization and the EU Journey" explains the government's approach to Turkish foreign policy in its initial years. Further, it traces the AKP's interest group coalition and the emergence of an alternative strategic culture under "Strategic Depth" and "zero problems with neighbors" policies against the prevailing, *realpolitik* culture of the Kemalists. Section 2 on "Identity Projection and Axis Shift toward the Middle East" analyzes the government's regional policies, domestic power struggles, and priorities that shaped a new logrolled coalition up until the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Section 3 on "Re-Securitization and the Emergence of Blue Homeland" analyzes the factors that contributed to a more general foreign policy re-orientation and ascendance of an activist naval posture between 2016 and 2020. The section also specifies the factors underpinning the policy realignment and softening of the Blue Homeland rhetoric during the 2020-2021 period. It concludes with a brief re-assessment of the admirals' letter about the Montreux regime in the context of the analysis, offering further insights into the causal logic that contributes to its significance. Chapter 6 summarizes the findings of the study and draws conclusions on how the combination of underlying structural and domestic causal factors influenced Turkey's foreign policy decisions between 2004 and 2021. This concluding chapter highlights how systemic pressures moderated by perceptions and preferences of domestic actors produced a hardline foreign policy response against threats, both internal and external, of which Blue Homeland is just one instance.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The thesis' literature review of the extant literature reveals that Turkey's Blue Homeland is an under-theorized, under-researched subject that can be augmented with a more informed approach to policy analysis. Much of the existing work describes Blue Homeland as an imprecise yet offensive and revisionist concept that upsets the regional status-quo. The great majority of the writing on the topic is journalistic or merely descriptive, and/or is written by people involved. Although there exist ad-hoc arguments regarding the interaction between systemic constraints such as changes in the distribution of relative power and domestic factors rendered through institutions, strategic culture, and state-society relations, they generally lack comprehensive analysis. The academic literature discusses Blue Homeland very briefly; there are only three approved theses in Turkey and one in the US that refer to this phrase. Similarly, a search of Google Scholar returns very few articles, nearly most of them deficient in inclusivity. Outside of the military realm, there exist no books that focus on this subject. While there is a substantial number of op-ed pieces and policy papers, very few publications adopt a multi-level approach based on a firm theoretical foundation to explain the rise of maritime geopolitics in Turkey.

A main challenge is that most studies fail to explain the shift in policy over time with a multidimensional approach, and instead discount continuity by offering a snapshot of a particular point in time and interpreting outcomes in an isolated context. These ahistorical, non-cultural conclusions typically assume no relation between the studied context and its past, opining that Turkey's current maritime policy discourse is largely unprecedented. This research proposes to observe the process from an outsider's point of view in its broader context – i.e., like a film strip rather than a photo frame. There are three sections in this chapter that provide an in-depth literature review of the major themes investigated in previous studies. Each section comprehensively

examines significant published sources for their emphasis on a particular theme to explain the policy shift in line with the research question. The choice for this organizing principle reflects the availability of publications in the public domain and themes that emerge from synthesizing key narratives in previous research. Some of the sources included are from non-scholarly accounts that are relevant to the policy space and shed useful light onto the discussion. The first section focuses on structural factors and systemic stimuli that act as triggers for policy change. It provides an overview of arguments on maritime geopolitics globally and strategic thinking about Blue Homeland specifically. The second section examines the political economy of energy insecurity and if/how it influences maritime policy. The final section investigates the impact of nationalist sentiment in domestic politics on the outcome in question, including the role of intervening factors in strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations on the AKP's nationalist turn since 2016.

1. Systemic Level: Maritime Geopolitics and Distribution of Power across the System

Seas are considered the “oldest global common” whereby the potential for an adversary to severely damage a country's survivability by denying access to critical chokepoints, global markets, and scarce energy resources results in the maritime domain being presented as a vital and urgent concern (Dowdall and Hasani 2010, 7). Home to the rich presence of living and non-living resources, this domain gives rise to contention among nations that dispute their rights to sovereign access. As most of the world's population lives within three hundred miles of a coastline, such littoral geographical areas may pose as a significant locus for much of the conflicts in the twenty-first century (Pfaltzgraff and Wright 2014). In addition, bearing in mind the importance of multilateral institutions, “qualities such as state sovereignty do not have clear-cut correspondence in the high seas” (Aaltola, Sipila, and Vuorisalo 2011, 7, 11). This complicates the quest for

awareness and control over risks in maritime commons. The high seas comprise nearly two-thirds of the world's oceans and act as the main arteries of connectivity while maritime transport accounts for around 90% of global trade by volume (“Ocean Shipping and Shipbuilding” 2021). At the turn of the twenty-first century, maritime zones and offshore energy resources that had previously remained outside the political control of nation-states have emerged as new areas of competition, especially considering technological shifts, discoveries, and synergies across these realms. Composed of high seas, trade routes, and marine resources that collectively form a critical part of the global ecosystem, these commons comprise much of the international security environment and are therefore fundamental to safeguarding the global system (Jasper 2010). Security of supply chains, support for critical industries dependent on energy resources, and military presence to guard overseas interests necessitate open access to maritime commons. In this context, the term “maritime geopolitics” denotes the “interplay of power, geographic space [of seas], and strategic decision-making on one hand” as well as the “various state actors pursuing individual or collective interests [at seas] on the other” (Østerud 2016; 1988).

Linking the importance of control over maritime commons to naval strategy, Alfred Mahan, the renowned naval historian, strategist, and geopolitical theorist of the late nineteenth century, argued that “British control of the seas, combined with a corresponding decline in the naval strength of its major European rivals, paved the way for Great Britain’s emergence as the world’s dominant military, political, and economic power” (“US Office of the Historian” 2020). He envisioned the US as the geopolitical successor of Britain and identified a list of key elements for the determination of sea power; some of which include geographical position, the extent of territory, and the character of government (Sempa 2014). Essentially, his concept of sea power rests on the three pillars of commerce, bases, and ships (Holmes 2014, 55). Mahan appreciated the

significance of naval supremacy for great power rivalry and believed that control of maritime commerce routes along with energy resources and logistical supply facilities are vital requisites for predominant influence in the world (Wey 2019). When his book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890) became an international best-seller, then-US President Theodore Roosevelt read it and truly believed in the idea that "... the American navy sprung from and was formed to protect its seaborne commerce" (Rubel 2012, 3). In his view, a nation's propensity for economic activity is what leads to maritime trade and the purpose of naval build-up is to protect sea routes. Compounding Mahan's concept with further significance, Ken Booth advanced a triad of his own, proposing that "seafaring states employ the oceans for three main purposes: as a medium for moving goods and people, projecting power for diplomatic or military purposes, and extracting natural resources" (Holmes 2014, 55). A command of the sea, "as an indicator of national power," writes Rubel, "allows a nation to set rules of the international order," which in the US context, "permitted the establishment of a liberal capitalist trading order" (Rubel 2012, 4). Extending Rubel's definition, for a country to be regarded as a "maritime power" in contemporary times, it must have an institutionalized national strategic vision for seas, possess "a world-class naval-industry complex in addition to a globally recognized shipbuilding capacity," and leverage "maritime domains for its economic development and security" (Şafak Polat 2022, 329; McDevitt 2016, 3; Güler 2022).

In contrast to Mahan's near-exclusive focus on achieving total command of the seas to protect merchant fleets, naval historian Sir Julian Corbett subordinated maritime control to the primacy of politics. He believed that "maritime strategy should always be derived from a nation's specific goals, purposes, and constraints" (Latham 2020). In other words, naval power is not a goal in and

of itself; it is rather a means to an end such as coercion of a rival state for political gains.⁴ While Corbett, like Mahan, did appreciate the relevance of economic causes for naval expansion, he conversely applied the logic of trade-naval power in his famous work “Some Principles of Maritime Strategy” (1911), where he writes: “... [*ceteris paribus*] it’s the longer purse that wins... and the most effective means we can employ to cripple our enemy's finance is to deny him the resources of seaborne trade”. As an example, consider the German navy under Tirpitz, who invented the theory of “risk fleet” to explain why the naval expansion was necessary for forestalling imminent strangulation of the German economy (Snyder 1991, 35). However, Corbett stressed that marine trade and commercial interests are only a subset of factors that influence a country’s policies. In the present context, if less advanced nations such as Greece, Egypt, and Pakistan invest heavily in naval power, critics would claim that Mahan’s argument “linking the existence of a nation’s economic wellbeing to the possession of a capable navy is no longer valid” (Rubel 2012, 6). Thus, while economic sustainability is a significant driver of maritime power, it is certainly not the sole causal factor that underpins it; geopolitics is another equally important factor, if not the more dominant one.

Bearing in mind these theoretical arguments, it is important to note that despite the changing nature, scope, and speed of modern warfare, naval power is still exclusive to state actors and that there are no proxy wars in maritime conflicts.⁵ In this context, grand strategy emerges as a key concept for policy formation in nation-states, deserving attention for the efficient interpretation of Mahan’s and Corbett’s views of maritime geopolitics. John Lewis Gaddis’ definition of grand

⁴ Furthermore, Corbett, like Carl van Clausewitz, “believed in the primacy of politics in war and regarded the navy as an as an element of a political arm” (Şafak Polat 2022, 330–31).

⁵ Notable exceptions to this are the Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, and pirates in Somalia or Nigeria who possess capabilities to disrupt maritime commerce and even inflict minor damage on naval vessels. However, these are transitory, tactical strengths that have no major strategic impact on maritime geopolitics writ large. There remains no match in proxy warfare for national naval powers in terms of scale and reach.

strategy “echoes the standard economic definition of scarcity, which is the alignment of unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities” (Gaddis 2018). For Paul Kennedy, it is a “multi-layered, complex method to cleverly utilize relationships among a country’s resources in order to reach a desired political outcome” (Kennedy 1991, 4–5). The duty of the political authority is to formulate a grand strategy based on national security and defense policy. Economic, diplomatic, and psychological strategies, in conjunction with the military strategy devised by high-ranking command officials, should “always be subordinate in the policy hierarchy” and “under the control of the political authority” (Eslen 2021, 20).

From time to time, great powers release their grand strategy white papers and conduct practices of public diplomacy. In the US, the executive branch periodically issues a National Security Strategy (NSS) document to “convey the President’s vision for how America will engage with the world” (The White House 2021). In China, a National Defense white paper is released by the State Council every five years (2019), similar to Russia’s Information Office (2021). In contrast, Turkey has no such document available for public discussion; its strategic outlook is rather opaque. The Secretariat of the National Security Council in Ankara presents limited information on its website, which is primarily regarding official state visits and the council’s structure rather than a strategic perspective that frames its policy decisions. Below the hierarchy of the executive presidential system since 2018, other ministries such as the MFA execute decisions on behalf of the president’s office instead of setting the vision for it. The MoD generally releases public statements for digital diplomacy rather than revealing strategic decisions for guidance to external parties. The following subsections comprise a critical analysis of strategic perspectives on maritime geopolitics offered by existing publications.

1.1. Development of Global Maritime Powers

There is rich historic content that emphasizes the significance of maritime power in world politics. In the earliest example of classical realist literature, Thucydides demonstrates how demographic, economic, and technological changes in the fifth century BC Greece functioned in alignment with the Athenian mastery of naval power to facilitate the “expansion of commerce among the Greek city-states and establishment of the hegemony of Hellas in the eastern Mediterranean” (Gilpin 1988). He portrays a spiral of “fear, honor, and interest as the prime movers driving human actions” (Holmes 2014, 54). Hence, this shift in power balance enabled by the successful creation of a large seaborne empire led to the rise of Athens. This instilled fear in an immovable Sparta that made war inevitable, an outcome Graham Allison refers to as the “Thucydides Trap” (Allison n.d.).⁶ His perspective offers the conventional wisdom that in an anarchic world order, “tensions rise when an ascendant power challenges the rules of the established order,” leading to conflict (Beckley and Brands 2021). Such challenges may manifest in the creation of a maritime empire, where the galley type, *Trireme*⁷, played a vital role for Athens to build its hegemony in ancient times, or a capacity for power projection via aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and AI-based unmanned vehicles in the present day. Key determinants of survival in such an environment are the distribution of material capabilities, intentions underlying activities, and acknowledgment or perceptions of others. “History reveals that a country’s rise and decline are directly related to the heft of its navy,” writes Jerry Hendrix (Hendrix 2021). Scientific progress, long-distance seafaring, and discoveries played key roles in the rise and fall of empires

⁶ Blue Homeland’s supporters among the 104 admirals refer to “Thucydides Trap” to warn Greece of the consequences of an arms race with Turkey, see: “*Thukidides tuzağına örnek şekilde düşüyorlar,*” (They fall into Thucydides Trap in an exemplary way), September 28, 2021, available from: <https://twitter.com/cemgurdeneznet/status/1442827061106774019>.

⁷ *Trireme* means “three-rower”. It was the main naval battle unit during Persian and Peloponnesian Wars in the fifth century BC.

overseas. In accordance with Mahan's theory on maritime supremacy, contemporary political geographers such as Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman briefly wrote, using the ideas of "heartland" and "rimland," about the centuries-long struggle for global hegemony between land-powers such as Sparta, Rome, and Russia versus sea-powers of Athens, Carthage, and the US (Kaplan 2013; Brands 2021).

The evolution of geopolitics in the context of the maritime commons in the past few decades has added an additional layer of complexity to the quest for maritime control around the world. Ostensibly, the shifting economic center of gravity toward the Indo-Pacific, marked by the rise of China, India, and Southeast Asia, coupled with the significant emergence of American global influence, changed the landscape of geopolitical competition, and set the scene for great power rivalry in the twenty first century. As such, rivals tend to approach seas with geopolitical ambitions and attribute heightened significance to maintaining an edge in naval power. To manage this complex environment, the US government committed to "safeguarding the global commons, to optimize the use of the shared sea, air, and space domains" (Sutton 2010) so that the broader process of globalization may continue unimpeded. Nonetheless, certain observers such as Cihat Yaycı claim that the fragmented nature of the international system and the absence of a global authority in a multipolar world induces self-help among state actors, prompting them to assert control over the near seas and resources therein (Habertürk TV 2020), resulting in a particular kind of competition. These individuals argue that due to the erosion of the concept of global commons, actors perceive access to resources as a privilege to be claimed rather than a right to be provided.

Furthermore, global conventions for understanding how to operate in commonly experienced circumstances are increasingly prone to subjective interpretations of individual actors, which in turn, transforms the maritime domain into an extremely conflictual environment that is more

politicized than global. The institutional and normative foundation of the maritime commons is based on regional alliances such as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Australia-UK-US Defence Pact (AUKUS), such as in the case of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Pacific (Aaltola, Sipila, and Vuorisalo 2011, 9). Extant literature demonstrates that these alliances may develop their own competing legal and policy frameworks over time. For example, a rising power like China, which places reservations on UNCLOS's arbitration procedures, "can spearhead the development of its own normative framework to rival the UN-centric one" (Aaltola, Sipila, and Vuorisalo 2011, 9), as evidenced in its territorial dispute with the Philippines in 2016. Due to the emergence of new powers, "vulnerabilities in the maritime commons, generalized by the lack of a governing authority, the myth of limitlessness, and lack of distributional equity make them acutely susceptible to threats from the forces reshaping the current world order" (Freeman 2016, 24).

In the context of great power rivalry, the US Navy released its strategic blueprint for the Arctic region – one of the largest maritime commons – in 2021, titled the "Blue Arctic," offering the general notion that "reduced ice coverage is making Arctic waters more accessible and navigable, thus turning it from White to Blue" (Vavasseur 2021). This document provides guidance on how US naval power may be applied to develop cooperative partnerships in a region of growing geopolitical and global importance, which holds an estimated 30% of the world's undiscovered natural gas reserves, 13% of the global conventional oil reserves, and \$1 trillion worth of rare earth minerals ("US Department of the Navy: Blue Arctic" 2021). The document articulates strategic imperatives for the US to project power in this emerging theatre of rivalry against Russia and China, two important challenging powers that have their own priorities. On the global stage, while Russia aims to carve a defensive perimeter in its "near abroad" including the Black Sea, China

develops an “offshore balancing” strategy⁸ to assert claims to sovereignty, dominate its near neighbors, and maintain an Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) bubble that encompasses the Indo-Pacific (Latham 2020).

Although Russia has historically displayed “defensive aggressiveness” (Kotkin 2016) by reinforcing a strategic depth around its core priority to ensure its survival in a dangerous world, it is “increasingly difficult to make that distinction due to its recent focus on offensive capabilities” (Medvedev 2015). Under the “Primakov Doctrine,” Russia strives toward a multipolar world and insists on its primacy in the post-Soviet space (Rumer 2019). As an instance, Moscow portrays its recent assault on Ukraine as a defensive move to stem NATO’s expansion right to its doorstep, an idea epitomized in Putin’s words as “free choice for one nation ends where the security concern of another begins” (Rajghatta 2022). Based on Russia’s prevailing belief that “NATO intends to encircle the country, Moscow’s activities in the Mediterranean combine a defensive posture with a renewed ambition to assert its presence on the global stage” (Pierini 2021). From an alternate perspective, one may consider the principal rationale for Russia’s return to the Mediterranean, and from there to the world’s oceans, as the need to build a defensive outer ring against the “prospect of a military confrontation in the European theater rather than the desire to regain great power status” (Rumer and Sokolsky 2021). Due to certain limitations of the Montreux Convention, geographic boundaries, and the poor shape of its shipyards, some analysts argue that Russia does not pursue “a global blue-water posture to challenge US naval supremacy” (Ülgen and Kasapoğlu 2021).

⁸ The term “offshore balancing” in the realist-inspired IR literature refers to “a particular strategy employed by great powers to prevent the rise of rival regional powers to the status of a regional hegemon” (Kolasi 2019). As implied by the word “offshore,” this strategy often involves naval diplomacy in service of political goals to encircle and contain a rising regional power.

Conversely, China's "active defense" posture and strategic focus on the defense of the mainland reflect its growing ambitions to supplant the US and dominate geopolitically vital waterways (Gady 2015). In particular, the reference to littoral waters in China's 2010 Ocean Development Report as "Blue Soil" implies that "territorial claims to the waters are as fundamental as the claims to land territory" (Cheng 2013). This terminology is reflective of China's increasing interest in naval power and aspirations to acquire great power status in global maritime affairs. However, some observers understand China's pursuit of global power to be modeled on the nineteenth-century imperial mercantilism that oversees a "seemingly endless flow of settlers, gunboats, and colonial outposts across the globe" (Taheri 2021). The Suez Canal crisis in 2021, for example, was a testament to the pivotal role of a major maritime artery for globalization and China's maritime geopolitics. Situated on one of the busiest routes between Europe and Asia, 12% of the global trade passes through the canal each day (BBC News 2021; IE 2021). The obstruction of the canal for six consecutive days in March 2021 because of an accident was considered a major setback to global supply chains, which highlighted the fragility of a global economy that primarily depends on maritime trade. Playing into Beijing's hands, the incident revived talk of the "northern passage in the Arctic as melting ice at the roof of the world opens new pathways [for Russia and China]" (Tharoor 2021), which takes 12 days less than the traditional route via the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal. As such, China's maritime doctrine "adheres more to Corbett's view of maritime strategy" (Latham 2020) that emphasizes commercial control, zonal defense, and strategic blockade rather than Mahan's concept of annihilating the adversary and leveraging maritime dominance to meet grand strategic ends.

In this context, the AUKUS military pact between the US, UK, and Australia may have intended to tilt the military balance in the Indo-Pacific to America's favor, a development labeled

by observers as a “coalition of ‘sea-powers’” in the Western world, hedging the “coalition of ‘land-powers’” in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Ikeuchi 2021).⁹ Iran is another land power in Eurasia that recently joined the SCO, perhaps as China’s response to the AUKUS pact to bring Tehran closer to Beijing (Bochkov 2021). Iran increases its “strategic depth” by materializing the promise of naval presence in the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, and even the Atlantic; a move that its chiefs consider as “a new chapter for power projection in open and distant seas” (*Tehran Times* 2021). Given the changes in geopolitics, some analysts such as Aris Marghelis view the Russia-Turkey-Iran cooperation as an axis of land powers pitched against the US-France-Greece coalition of sea powers. They label the latter as the “East Med AUKUS” (Marghelis 2021, 39), set on a mission to apply “offshore balancing” against the former (Gürdeniz and Salcı 2021). Their prevailing argument posits that western sea-powers home in on Eurasia and apply a containment strategy against rising actors while eastern land-powers sail toward high seas while applying a forward defense strategy against their Western rivals.¹⁰

In addition to strategic imperatives, ideational factors associated with to identity-formation and community-building have also notably influenced maritime geopolitics throughout history. Regarding ownership of the seas as a strategic domain, the idea of a maritime homeland as an ancient concept is certainly worth exploring. The Roman Empire named the Mediterranean Sea *Mare Nostrum* (Our Sea) during the conquest of Sicily in the third century BC to mark their dominance over the basin; this term also acquired an alternative meaning in contemporary times, embracing the “diversity, exchange, and cooperation among cultures of the Mediterranean” (“Mare Nostrum?” 2015). Samuel Agbamu argues that *Mare Nostrum* was articulated into a popular

⁹ This is similar to the Delian League of Athens versus the Peloponnesian League of Sparta in the fifth century BC Greece.

¹⁰ The term “forward defense” refers to the strategic concept of military deployment as close as possible to an enemy’s line of contact to meet threats further away from one’s own territories. The NATO alliance developed this concept as part of its defense planning for Central Europe in the 1960s (NATO 2013).

political discourse that “elided the geographical distance between Africa and Italy, as well as the temporal distance between ancient Roman and modern Italian imperialism” (Agbamu 2019, 252). Although the narrative eventually receded from Italy’s political life in the post-war period, the alluring idea of transposing the Roman Empire into the modern EU reinforced a rigid definition of “the body of a single people in Europe,” the associated geographic boundaries, and militarization of external borders (Agbamu 2019, 267).

Such powerful ideational factors carry important weight in the development of political shifts. The Vatican’s Secretary of State, Pietro Parolin, and the former Italian Premier, Giuseppe Conte proposed a modern narrative of citizenship in 2020, based on the idea of an imagined community and a melting pot in the region, code-named *Mediterraneo Allargato* (Enlarged Mediterranean): “We need a new Mediterranean citizenship at large and incardinated on the brotherhood and a political ambition that transpires in the interventions. The premise of the Mediterranean cannot but be a common look on the *Mare Nostrum*, crossroads of people and cradle of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam” (Geronico 2020). This is closely linked with the “EU’s ambitious region-building approach, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)” and the NATO-Mediterranean Dialogue that aims to “establish a common area of peace, stability, and shared prosperity among littoral states” (İşeri 2019, 260; NATO 2015). The dialogue includes Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, where NATO plays an active role to monitor threats and facilitate bilateral efforts at the tactical level to de-escalate tensions around Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean (NATO 2019).

Although these order-building initiatives failed to achieve regional cohesion due to “contested state identities and regional security concerns (e.g., Cyprus)” (İşeri 2019, 260), individual state actors such as Italy and Turkey leveraged the idea to promote regionalization efforts at a subordinate level. The strategic framework underpinning the initiative to expand Italy’s economic

and political presence in the region and make it the “premier trans-Mediterranean actor,” comments Michaël Tanchum, “enjoys a synergy with Turkey’s own drive to develop inter-regional connectivity in the roughly overlapping geographical space defined by the former territories of the Ottoman Empire” (Tanchum 2020b; 2021). With strategic autonomy, he argues, “Rome’s rebalancing to the *Mediterraneo Allargato* has resulted in Italy’s pivot to Africa and created a strategic symbiosis with Turkey across the wider Mediterranean basin” (Tanchum 2020b).

1.2. Turkish Foreign Policy, Maritime Geopolitics, and Naval Modernization

To make observations and inferences about Turkish strategies and maritime policies necessitates recourse to mostly informal, publicly available resources. Based on previous research, foundational elements of the strategic shift in Turkish maritime policy can also be traced through history. Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the Western policy sidelined Turkey’s geostrategic importance as a frontline country between different blocs. At the crossroads of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Western Asia, Turkey has been a regional center of attraction that oversees vital sea lanes, lucrative markets, and transit routes to rich energy deposits, which are highly significant due to the diverging push-and-pull dimensions to inter-regional and intra-regional relationships (Ulrichsen 2012). Against this backdrop, Turkey’s perception of its geopolitical role started to shift in the post-Cold War era. Aslı Aydıntaşbaş observes that “Turkey is not a bridge to the Middle East nor a model for the Muslim world, ...but a country pursuing its own path in a region to which the US is less and less committed” (Shapiro and Aydıntaşbaş 2021). She expresses her criticism that, thirty years later, the persistent view from Washington toward Ankara is “primarily as a piece in the strategic puzzle of NATO’s common defense” (Finkel 2012, 77).

According to SETA, an influential think-tank that influences the policies outlined by AKP, the most distinguishing characteristics of rising powers in an era of multipolar, fragmented world order are “diplomatic, economic activism” and “strategic autonomy” (Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi 2020, 43–44). This is especially evident in Turkey’s developing multi-dimensional partnerships with Asian countries despite its membership with NATO. Galip Dalay and Fuat Keyman observe that Turkey’s quest for strategic autonomy is undertaken at the cost of “ideational and strategic decoupling from the West” (Dalay and Keyman 2021). It is suggested that the AKP’s governing elite are of the notion that “the world has entered a post-Western phase” and argue for Turkey to “drop the geopolitical anchor to the West, initiate flexible alliances to enhance its regional influence, thus adjusting to a new normality in international affairs” (Dalay and Keyman 2021). Noteworthy here is Jack Snyder’s observation that “strategies for security through expansion make more sense in multipolar situations” (Snyder 1991, 26) due to abundant geopolitical slack for maneuverability. By this logic, in the context of Turkey’s relations with Russia and its turn to Eurasianism, Ersan Erşen indicates that “as Turkey’s prospects in the Middle East and the EU are getting dimmer, the rise of new partners in Asia could offer geopolitical and economic benefits” (Erşen 2019, 123). In alignment with this statement, journalist Cengiz Çandar adds, “Under Erdoğan, Turkey is steadily sailing toward a non-Western trajectory in a multipolar world where China is emerging in its East” (Candar 2021a).

Concerning the role of relative material capabilities in support of strategic autonomy, analyst Ryan Gingeras observes that “Turkey perceives itself as the greatest power in the Eastern Mediterranean... surrounded by rivals and adversaries and it will use strength to assert itself, because it can” (Champion 2020; Güvenç and Filis 2020). For China scholar Iain Johnston, the word “assertive” here refers to “a threat to impose substantially higher costs on adversaries” in the

region (Johnston 2013, 45).¹¹ By implication, according to US official Richard Outzen, the central logic driving Turkey's assertiveness and challenge to the established order are encapsulated in Erdoğan's expression of "*oyun oynayan değil, oyun kuran, oyun bozan bir Türkiye*" (a Turkey that does not play the game but upends and resets it), which captures the strategic narrative to "establish new 'games' on terms favorable to Turkey's interests" (Outzen 2021a, 6). Regarding material capabilities, the annual report from the prestigious Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) indicates the defense-export industry as "a key enabler of Turkey's more aggressive foreign policy" ("SIPRI Yearbook 2021 | Summary" 2021). More specifically, Outzen points out that "the integration of drones, electronic warfare, maneuver, and precision strike capabilities across domains is the opening phase of a revolution in Turkey's military affairs" (Outzen 2021a, 5).

As such, there is clear evidence that "the interplay between the defense industry and the strategic policy shift are dependent upon each other" (Murphy 2020, 33). In his regional analysis of five different power indexes, Zenonas Tziarras affirms that "Turkey is the most powerful state of the region and has the economic capacity to inflict harm on others" (Tziarras 2019, 60). In comparison, Tanchum claims that Greece anticipates future power shifts due to a "relative decline in its naval strength vis-à-vis Turkey" and that it "feels less confident about its own capabilities and acts more assertively" to bridge the power gap "with no time to waste" while conditions remain favorable (Tanchum 2020a; Papachelas 2021a). Since "the year 2016 brought the revival of Aegean disputes, ushering in a series of incidents almost on a weekly basis" (Alioğlu Çakmak 2019, 293), the main concern in Athens is that "Greece has a green-water navy which can operate safely only in the Aegean Sea; it lacks the means to project power in the deep waters of the Eastern

¹¹ Johnston uses the word "assertive" in the context of China's naval assertiveness.

Mediterranean” (M. Dr. Karagiannis 2021). Thus, both sides appear to be engaged in an arms race with plans to acquire advanced platforms and tilt the balance in their favor.

Ultimately, these observations have far-reaching implications, as “differential growth rates across states over time drive changes in relative power and provide declining states with incentives to wage preventive war to enhance their chances for long-run security” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 186; Snyder 1991, 25). Furthermore, Mitchell McLaughlin finds that “29% of disputes on maritime zones have potential to escalate into militarized conflict, and even greater if there are multiple issues at stake such as legacy territorial disputes or clashes of identity” (McLaughlin Mitchell n.d.). Thus, there is plenty of reason for concern in and around Turkey. In the light of wider geopolitical shifts and contests for power at sea, McLaughlin’s argument provides a justification for perceived mutual insecurity in both Turkey and Greece. It also lends support to Hal Brand’s argument that an emergent maritime power like Turkey’s “naval build-up, claim to its place, and the resulting rivalry with the established order is normal and fits comfortably within the contours of contemporary global politics” (Brands 2021).

1.3. Strategic Perspectives on Turkish Maritime Policy

Turkey has striven to elevate its international role to that of a regional power. Therefore, it is necessary that its Blue Homeland concept be understood within this context. In a nutshell, Blue Homeland defines the “geographic boundaries of Turkey’s maritime rights and interests” (Eslen 2021, 97). The National Security Policy Document, also known as the “Red Book,” is a classified file that contains Turkey’s national security and defense policy – the contents of this document are unavailable to the public for discussion. In efforts to achieve peace and societal welfare, the AKP government initially maintained a “zero problems with neighbors” policy based on Davutoğlu’s Strategic Depth doctrine and soft power between 2002-2015; however, between 2016 and 2021, it

adopted Cem Gürdeniz's Blue Homeland forward-defense doctrine and hard-power focus (Barkey 2020). Certain academic observers argue that while the Blue Homeland and Strategic Depth doctrines act as "anti-theses" to each other (Uzgel and Nas 2020), they both emphasize the need for Turkey as a central player to become a "regional leader" (Davutoğlu 2020), to "move from a 'wing state' of the West to a 'pivotal state' of the East" (Genc 2019), and to "upgrade from regional actor to regional power status" (Gürdeniz 2021b, 76). As geopolitical conditions influence strategic considerations, the importance of the Turkish Straits as strategic maritime chokepoints that regulate the control of access to the Black Sea presents itself as another common theme in both arguments. Traces of influence from Mahan's ideas are discernible in their propositions that "the ability to project naval power adds to a country's prestige" (Murphy 2020, 70–71) and that seas "provide strategic depth and geopolitical maneuverability to defend a country" (Gürdeniz 2021b, 64).

However, there are certain subtle differences in the extent and mode of each author's proposed geopolitical outreach for Turkey. Davutoğlu's concept references Mahan's observation, which posits that "sea-powers have to control strategic locations around the globe to achieve hegemony" (Davutoğlu 1997). His opportunistically strategic justifications such as geo-culturalism and multi-axial diplomacy between 2002 and 2010 emphasized Turkey's "aspirational multilateralism" (Outzen and Çağaptay 2022) and bridge-building in the post-Ottoman hinterland, especially in the Arab Middle East, based on common economic interests, history, and religion. Similarly, Gürdeniz primarily explains his vision in terms of the "structure of the international system" (Elman and Jensen 2014; K. N. Waltz 2010), based on the view that Turkey as an emerging power is a pole in its own merit with aspirations for regional leadership (Gürdeniz 2020a, 61–62). While he also references Mahan's doctrine and promotes building offensive capabilities, Gürdeniz steers clear

of hegemonic ambitions to dominate the seas, arguing instead to secure Turkey's littoral waters, deny its adversaries total control of geopolitically vital maritime domains, and achieve a certain parity with the West (Gürdeniz 2013, 44). Referring to the incendiary letter by the admirals in April 2021, which he also signed, he says: "Turkey has nothing to gain from a continuous operational NATO presence in the Black Sea or from pushing the limits of the Montreux Convention" (Salcı 2021). Given his resentment of the Gülenist¹² coup plots and purges of naval officers between 2008 and 2013, it is natural for Gürdeniz to view NATO as a hindrance to Turkey's rise. In his writings, much of the criticism for Turkey's relative maritime backwardness is attributed to bureaucratic politics and "army-dominated theorists [under NATO's influence] who maintain an unchallenged monopoly on military strategy and priorities" (Güvenç 2002, 3). He believes that the country should not be bound by thinking modalities of the Cold War era, and instead, should hammer out new partnerships in the region to gain its deserved place as a maritime nation. Extending the security concept beyond Turkey's neighborhood, Gürdeniz advocates for naval presence in the "Red Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Arabian Sea, including the Persian Gulf" to defend Blue Homeland from afar (Gürdeniz 2020c). Furthermore, he claims that "maritime global commons are under the hegemony of the West and imperialism; the Turkish navy is the only capable force to represent the Turkic world in this restricted environment" (Gürdeniz 2021a, 35). By meticulously examining how great powers such as the US, Russia, and Britain turned into maritime states, he charts a course for Turkey as the heir to "ancient Anatolian civilizations" to unleash its true potential at seas (Gürdeniz 2015, 70–71, 76–77). Critics of his prescription for an

¹² Gülenists are an Islamic religious cult, a charity organization allegedly tasked to serve humanity. It was formerly known as the *Hizmet Movement* and now as FETÖ (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization). Named after its founder Fethullah Gülen, who is considered as a fugitive terrorist by Turkey and charged for orchestration of the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, FETÖ became an underground opposition group in exile that advocates relentlessly for the overthrowing of the Turkish government.

activist navy argue that “at a time when Turkey faces rapid technological advances and an uncertain strategic environment, it should opt for a cautious and defensive naval posture... should strive to create its own A2/AD shield...instead of building a Mahan-style power projection navy” (Kurtarcan and Kayaoğlu 2017; Murphy 2020, 68). However, as elaborated in Chapters 4 and 5, possession of such power-projection capabilities does not necessarily imply offensive intentions.

1.4. Critical Arguments about Blue Homeland’s Emergence and Influence

Gürdeniz is an ardent supporter of redirecting the land-centric mentality to the seas; he defines Blue Homeland as the “symbol of Turkish people’s new-found interest in maritime affairs in an era shaped by geopolitical rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean” (Gürdeniz 2021b, 62). Overall, based on his frequent media appearances and narratives surrounding his use of the *#MaviVatan* hashtag,¹³ he emerged in the post-2016 period as the *de facto* opinion leader of an elite civil-military joint movement supported by Yayıcı to challenge the established, land-oriented decision-making hierarchy in Turkey. Through his writing in books, weekly op-ed articles, and his statements on TV programs, he claimed that the Turkish army high-command’s protectionist, conservative mindset on the primacy of land over sea handicapped the country’s modernization and geopolitical progress (Gürdeniz 2020g; 2020b). However, such ideas are exclusive to an elite group in Turkey; according to a recent survey by Kadir Has University, an overwhelming majority (76%) of Turkish people “do not know what Blue Homeland is,” and even those who did mostly “associate it with the Cyprus Problem” rather than a larger strategic plan (Aydın 2020, 26). Besides the lack of grass-roots movements to support the Blue Homeland narrative, critics argue that

¹³ *#MaviVatan* and associated hashtags such as *#MaviUygarlık* (Blue Civilization) and *#TürkiyeDenizçileşmelidir* (Turkey should become a maritime state) imbued people with the zeitgeist, culminating in a “networked aggregator of texts, images, and videos” (Mottahedeh 2015). *#MaviVatan* ranked among the top global trend topics (TT) several times in 2019-2020, most notably on August 10, 2020, in protest of the EEZ delimitation between Greece and Egypt. As a tool of public diplomacy, it created a shared experience of the struggle to upkeep national sovereignty and awareness of Blue Homeland.

another reason for this ignorance is that “politicians deliberately refrain from uttering the phrase ‘*Mavi Vatan*’” to try to control dominant narratives in Turkey and suppress discussions around it following the admirals’ letter incident in April 2021 (Bulut 2021). Yet, Israel’s maritime strategic evaluation report from Haifa University’s Centre for Maritime Policy and Strategy for 2021 highlights that “...58% of Turkey’s citizens view the EEZs as an issue of importance for national security, as opposed to only 3.8% that held this position at the beginning of 2020.... ‘Blue Homeland’ doctrine is first and foremost about geostrategic interests and sovereignty” (Eilat and Hayut-Man 2020, 7).

Other observers opine that Blue Homeland combines “elements of political and foreign policy factors regarding security dilemmas, prestige, and power projection all in one” (Murphy 2020, 72). US official Outzen is one of these observers, who argues that “[tension in the Eastern Mediterranean] is not a problem of revisionism versus status quo; it is a very messy intersection of legal, economic, and strategic interests that have been in conflict for decades” (Outzen 2021b). In the present “new normal” where “there is a gray zone of Turkish activities that are being conducted at a level above peace and a level below war,... we have less clarity on who is the aggressor and who the defender” (M. Karagiannis 2021). In this context, the SETA study employs a neoclassical realist approach to propose a grand strategy for Turkey, claiming that “Blue Homeland is not merely rhetorical but real, as evidenced by the largest naval exercise to date in 2019” (Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi 2020, 112), which was more than a mere exercise for several observers. Despite the display of hard-power capabilities, however, the policy did not achieve its expectation in shaping public opinion: Kadir Has University’s poll result (2020) indicates that most Turkish people are unaware of Blue Homeland’s meaning.

Not all Turkish strategists agree with the new maritime strategy, or at least, they disagree with the way it has been expressed. To analyze their views is important for uncovering for some of the shortfalls in both the theoretical background and practical applicability of the Blue Homeland concept. Hardliner opponents of this proposition argue that “as an irredentist concept...within the Eurasianist paradigm, the ‘Blue Homeland’ is part of a broader strategy of confronting the West and establishing Turkish supremacy in the region” (Erdemir and Kowalski 2020). Former ambassador Selim Kunalp¹⁴ agrees that “it’s a maximalist concept, a lullaby to Turkish ears” (Kunalp 2021). Other critics such as Gürdeniz’s close colleague Türker Ertürk claim that Blue Homeland is not a well-defined, agreed-upon concept, and that it is instead used by the AKP to further its Islamist agenda (Ertürk 2020). He argues that Erdoğan employs the symbolic capital represented by Blue Homeland as means to an end, for political gains specifically, instead of an ultimate value. In fact, “although this concept appears in domestic debates, it is not official policy” according to the Turkish MFA (“Crisis Group: Turkey-Greece” 2021). İlhan Uzgel and Çiğdem Nas concur that “Blue Homeland is not a doctrine” and that one of its misfortunes is to be executed under the AKP’s reign, characterized by “regional ambitions” and “over-extension,” alongside a foreign policy motto called *değerli yalnızlık* (precious loneliness), as a legitimization strategy to sustain Turkey’s isolation. (Uzgel and Nas 2020; Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi 2020, 73). Nas adds that the AKP needed to “buttress Blue Homeland’s hard power strategy to ameliorate downsides of detachment from the region” after 2016, while Uzgel attributes the weakness of Blue Homeland partly to the “lack of a firm theoretical foundation and political philosophy as a point of origin” (Uzgel and Nas 2020). While the points made here are valid, most of these critics either have not

¹⁴ Selim Kunalp is the grandson of the last Ottoman Minister of Interior, Ali Kemal Bey, who sided with the British government during the Turkish War of Independence in 1919-1922. Ali Kemal Bey’s great-grandson from his first wife Winifred Brun is Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister of the UK.

published any in-depth research studies regarding maritime geopolitics or tend to weigh Blue Homeland particularly through the lens of the AKP's policies rather than as an independent concept. While Uzgel and Nas exceptionally identify a theoretical deficiency in the concept, they do not offer an analytical framework or a comparison with alternative strategic proposals.

Like Erdemir and Kowalski, Sinem Adar also evaluates Blue Homeland in the context of Turkey's relatively more general policy re-orientation following the failed coup attempt in 2016. Regarding Turkey's expansive use of the military for coercive diplomacy, Adar observes that "Erdoğan's personal ambition to remain in power conveniently overlapped with the increasing national security concerns, bringing Ottomanist ideals side by side with Eurasianist policies" (Adar 2020). Adar's argument renders support to some observers who claim that Erdoğan embraced the Blue Homeland strategy to reinforce feelings of resentment toward regional isolation, western antagonism, and reinvigorate memories of the glorious imperial past. Due to the inherent primacy of hard power and gunboat diplomacy corresponding with Turkish actions, Uzgel argues that Blue Homeland is an instrument of the AKP's militarized, assertive foreign policy rather than a defensive strategy (Uzgel and Nas 2020). Concerning the practical applicability of the project, strategist Nejat Eslen essentially agrees with Gürdeniz's concept of Blue Homeland, yet expresses disappointment that the "government fell short of fulfilling its promise to realize Blue Homeland and failed to use its means effectively to meet the stated ends" (Eslen 2021, 87–90). For Eslen, despite all the work carried out, a grand strategy document for Blue Homeland fails to exist even now, without which "Turkey cannot have a geostrategy for the Eastern Mediterranean region" (Eslen 2021, 87). Soner Polat, a retired late admiral of Gürdeniz's term, also stresses that "the starting point [not the end goal] of Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean strategy should be to declare an EEZ" including areas disputed with Greece and the RoC (Polat 2019, 113). However, the

extension of national sovereignty from territorial boundaries to global maritime commons has raised questions among critics. As each new forward defense zone gives rise to the rationale and the springboard for the next, skeptics of Gürdeniz’s view argue that the proponents of this “geopolitical approach” deviate from Blue Homeland’s core doctrine of cultivating maritime consciousness and adding instead a disputed region into the fold of the *Vatan* concept that is “neither practicable nor realistic, nor lawful” (Güller 2021a). This view aligns with the “domino theory” that Snyder cites as one of the myths of expansion, which asserts that the aim of territorial expansion (e.g., in Libya) is to prevent the “loss of strategic forward positions” (e.g. in Cyprus) and “to forestall cascading dominoes” (e.g., in northern Syria) (Snyder 1991, 3–4). Other critics point out that the territorial homeland as the origin of the *Vatan* concept is fixed and non-negotiable, whereas zones of maritime jurisdiction such as EEZs must necessarily be negotiated among littoral states to have an effect (Uzgel and Nas 2020). The composite nature of EEZ maritime jurisdiction zones in Blue Homeland differs from territorial waters and air space rights under national sovereignty (Güvenç and Filis 2020); in their view, EEZ lines are not “outer boundaries of a country’s homeland” (Kılıç Yaşın 2021a, 149).

1.5. Regional Geopolitics and Views of Turkey

The constant changes in the regional constellation of powers embody another factor that influenced Turkey’s adoption of an assertive maritime strategy, since the present conflicts are, to a large extent, “moving targets of greater complexity” (Egnell 2013). In addition to strategic considerations in Turkey, it is important to elaborate on how regional power politics and perceptions of it relate to the Blue Homeland concept. Adar observes that the lack of a swift and firm response from the Euro-Atlantic alliance to the botched coup attempt in 2016 “accentuated the underlying anxiety over the Turkish state’s perseverance, providing the justification for using

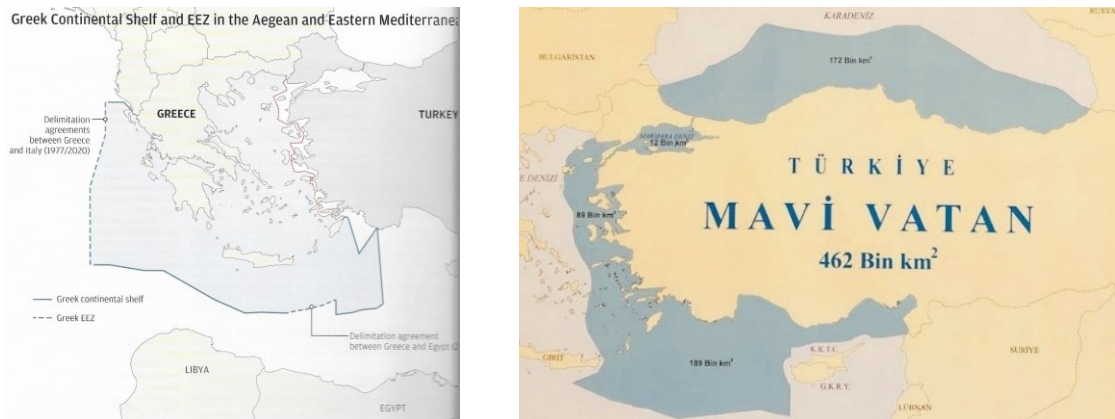
hard-power instruments to defuse perceived foreign threats” (Adar 2020). Drawing from a similar approach, İşeri and Bartan argue that “self-help politics at the regional level in the Mediterranean sets the contours of unit-level behavior in the making of Turkish foreign policy” (İşeri and Bartan 2019, 112–20). In his book *Geopolitical Roadmap for Blue Homeland*, Polat refers to rival powers in the Eastern Mediterranean, reminding the reader that “a rule-of-thumb in geopolitics is to respond to a rival international coalition of power [such as Greece-Cyprus-Israel-Egypt] with its akin” (Polat 2019, 26). These threat vectors, mapped by capabilities and intentions, show that “Turkey’s threat perception has shifted from its traditional foe Russia in the north toward the west and south (Aegean, Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East)” (Polat 2015, 178–79).¹⁵ This statement is particularly relevant to Turkey’s expanding forward military bases and ports overseas in the Middle East and Africa including Qatar, Somalia, and Libya, which further underlines this hard-power shift (Adar 2020). According to Tanchum, such blue-water expansion projects along sea lines of communication and dual-use port installations resemble, in miniature, China’s “String of Pearls” initiative in the Indian Ocean (Tanchum 2019).

In the context of the Turkey-EU axis, Ankara’s worsening relations with Brussels over the Mediterranean accelerated the strategic change in maritime policy. In a report titled “The Role of Maritime Zones” prepared for the EU Commission, the authors conclude that “there is an incoherence of legislation, inadequate cooperation, and unresolved disputed zones” in the Mediterranean (Oral 2009). The EU’s proposed maritime jurisdiction, which includes Greece and Cyprus, leaves no EEZ for Turkey in the Aegean Sea, and only one-third of its potential EEZs in the Mediterranean (Gürdeniz 2020f). Serhat Güvenç opines that a key reason underlying the

¹⁵ There may be counterarguments to this claim in the context of Russia’s expansion since 2008 and recent assault on Ukraine in 2022, which are excluded here due to the limitation of time and scope of this research. Polat’s claim reflects the worldview of Blue Homeland’s progenitors after the reversal of the *Bahoz* coup trials under Gülenist persecution between 2008-2014.

emergence of Blue Homeland was a “reaction to the missed opportunity on Greece’s part to take Aegean Sea disputes to the ICJ in The Hague in 2004 as agreed within the framework of Turkey’s roadmap for accession to the EU” (Güvenç and Filis 2020). Figure 1 below shows claims of Greece and Turkey to maritime zones in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, respectively. The total sea area of contested sovereignty covers roughly 120,000 km².

Figure 1: Greece’s Claim to Maritime Zones, Turkey’s Mavi Vatan Maritime Zones

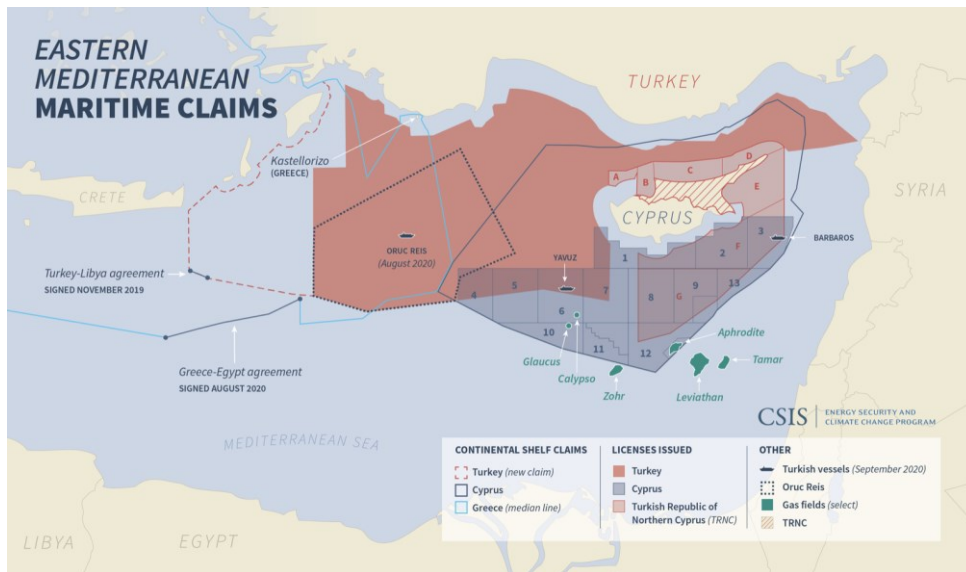


Sources: Dimitrios Dages, *Greece* (2020), Dr. Sertaç Hami Başeren (2015), Dr. Cihat Yaycı, *Turkey* (2020)

To many observers, this friction is compounded by the lack of a forceful and balanced mediator – such as the US – to broker a compromise between Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus. According to a recent survey conducted by ELIAMEP and IPC in Turkey and Greece, “there is distrust to the mediating role that the international community can play in resolving outstanding disputes”; further, the normative role of the EU in “turning Turkey’s accession process into a tool for the settlement of these disputes is no longer considered realistic” (Grigoriadis 2021). In other words, inequities, distrust, and stagnation in EU-Turkey relations also contribute to rising geopolitical tensions. For instance, the “decision to allow Cyprus to gain EU membership as a partitioned state” (Hintz 2019b) was a major misstep on Europe’s part. From a similar viewpoint, since “the Eastern Mediterranean’s *de facto* maritime boundaries unjustly and illegally deny Turkey part of its rightful maritime territory” (Figure 2 below) (Tanchum 2020a), Ankara is unsatisfied with the

existing distribution of spoils and considers its actions as defending international law. Due to its regional isolation, “Turkey could no longer rely on diplomacy to protect what it perceives as its interests and rights” (Ünlühisarçıklı 2021), implying that the influence of structural factors “significantly limited the menu of foreign policy choices” for the Turkish government (Rose 1998, 147). Progenitors of Blue Homeland argue that Turkey previously had the potential to employ diplomatic tools to negotiate or unilaterally declare its EEZ in the Mediterranean. However, the AKP failed to carry out a serious initiative for several years. According to Barış Doster, as a result of the government’s ignorance, Turkey found itself in a difficult situation and was forced to put the carriage before the horse – it rushed to “employ naval power before exhausting diplomatic options in maritime geopolitics” (Doster 2021, 33) and attempted to fill the legal and diplomatic void with military instruments.

Figure 2: Eastern Mediterranean Maritime Claims



Source: CSIS (2020)

Emerging rival alliances in the region also elevate hard-power politics over soft-power diplomacy. According to Nasr Salem from the Egyptian army, “growing military cooperation between Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece mainly aims to rein in the Turks and trim their violations in

the region” (Al Monitor 2021). Moreover, France supports this tri-partite alliance and envisions a *Pax Mediterranea* under the auspice of the EU’s armed forces with a more active role for Europe as an autonomous force (Emmanuel Macron 2020; Rao 2022). A high-ranking French naval officer argues that Turkey’s acts in the Eastern Mediterranean are “like what China does in the South China Sea... The French discourse on the Turkish attitude in the Eastern Mediterranean resembles in many aspects the American discourse on the Chinese posture” (Marghelis 2021, 25). His testimony that, through naval diplomacy, the alliance between France and Greece-Cyprus-Egypt aims to prevent the rise of a rival - a potential regional hegemon in Turkey. French President Emmanuel Macron has already branded NATO as “brain-dead” to highlight its obsolescence in a chaotic world of rising powers such as Turkey, Russia, and China (The Economist 2019).

In support of this offshore balancing strategy in Europe is French social theorist Jacques Attali, who is an influential advisor to the French presidency and a proponent of France’s return to its formal colonial glory as a hegemonic power by dominating the Mediterranean (Attali 2018, 58). Referring to Blue Homeland, he draws a parallel with the years leading up to World War II, makes a wholesale analogy between Erdoğan’s Turkey and Hitler’s Germany, and warns about the pitfall of conflict avoidance, or “buck-passing,” by failing to balance a resurgent power: “We have to take Turkey very seriously and be prepared to act. If our predecessors had taken the Führer’s speeches seriously from 1933 to 1936, they could have prevented this monster from accumulating the means to do what he did” (“Parikiaki Cyprus: Rush for Mediterranean Gas” 2020). In response to his observation, the French-Greek mutual defense pact in October 2021 emerged as a landmark deal that included a clause for mutual assistance in case of an armed attack [from Turkey, as mentioned verbatim] against the territorial integrity of either country. As per Attali’s suggestion, the agreement aims to “balance Turkish naval and air supremacy, if not tip the balance in Athens’s

favor” and acts as “a step toward European strategic autonomy” (Candar 2021b). Overall, this article formalizes a separate, bilateral alliance that “goes beyond Article 5 of NATO’s charter” and undermines alliance cohesion, encouraging each member to “seek their own ad hoc guarantees” from elsewhere (*The Economist* 2021c). Areteos observes that these rivalries “did nothing but exaggerate the anxiety of the perseverance of the state and the wider ‘status anxiety’ of Turkey” (Areteos 2021, 11). In other words, these powerful regional partnerships, shifting alliances, and rivalries have a profound impact on Turkey’s sense of deep, existential insecurity. One of the major frustrations driving Ankara’s assertive approach to defending its maritime interests since 2016 is associated with the fact that “other Mediterranean states are pursuing a containment policy to chip away at Turkey’s sovereignty, economic security, and geopolitical reach” (“Crisis Group: Turkey-Greece” 2021).

From a regional perspective, Greece’s former National Security Advisor, Vice Admiral Alexandros Diakopoulos, compares the Blue Homeland doctrine to “the maritime equivalent of ‘*Lebensraum*’, or the expansion of Germany’s ‘vital space’ attempted under Hitler in World War II,” and calls on Greece to align its interests to those of the US and France (Diakopoulos 2020). Greece’s current National Security Advisor, Thanos Dokos, renders a more realistic interpretation when he says “Blue Homeland is both a narrative and a strategic plan to overcome the obstacles posed by geography and international law to expand Turkish maritime zones” (Syrigos and Dokos n.d., 100). Although Greek officials highlight that “they are not in competition with Turkey over regional influence,” Greece positioned itself as a game-maker across multilateral platforms such as the *Philia Forum* held in Athens in 2021, which included participants from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain (“Crisis Group: Turkey-Greece” 2021). As a sign of Washington’s strategic pivot from Ankara to Athens, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo substantiated Greece’s

enlarged role with his expectation of “Crete to become a well-known name in the US, as familiar to Americans as Ramstein Air Base or Okinawa is” (Rubin 2021). Traces of such a reference to the act of external balancing and to aggregate capabilities with other states in an effort to offset a rival power, is also available in a statement by the EU High Commissioner Josep Borrell, which signifies deep anxiety in Europe about its place in the new world order: “Europe is facing a situation in which we can say that the old Empires are coming back, at least three of them: Russia, China, and Turkey... which represent for us a new environment” (Borell n.d.). Reflecting this tension among NATO members, former commander of the Supreme Allied Command Europe (SACEUR) Admiral (Ret.) James Stavridis adds that “the preeminent maritime hotspot in the world is not the South China Sea or the Arabian Gulf but the Eastern Mediterranean” (Stavridis 2020). In a sense, the region has become a “microcosm of the international community” (CEPA 2021).

Since 2020, there have been speculations in strategic circles about Turkey potentially abandoning its new maritime doctrine as a pre-condition for mending ties with the West, and for some observers, this is arguably what happened. The EU’s annual reports on Turkey had repeatedly criticized its frustrations with Greek and Greek Cypriot maritime claims in the Mediterranean since 2009, demanding acquiescence for the progression of membership accession talks (EU Commission 2009). Despite Blue Homeland’s rise since 2016, Gingeras discusses how the tide may shift as a result of other pressing concerns such as the EU’s threat of economic sanctions and the AKP’s quest to end its regional isolation: “Gürdeniz and like-minded allies have speculated that Erdoğan might forfeit Turkey’s maritime claims in the Mediterranean in order to improve relations with the US and the EU” (Gingeras 2021). Although Erdoğan gathered support from the proponents of Blue Homeland, the recent crackdown on the former admirals signals a

geopolitical reversal in Turkish foreign policy – a shift away from the anti-Western stance (Gurcan 2021a). As a testament to Blue Homeland’s heavy reliance on regional power politics, Berk Esen notes that “Erdoğan recalibrates his position by eliminating officers affiliated with the Blue Homeland and supporting the recent NATO offensive against Russia to curry favors from the Biden administration” (Esen 2021). In other words, despite the antipathy between Ankara and Moscow in recent years, Erdoğan is trying to cultivate a working relationship with Biden in an attempt to promote the idea that “Turkey remains as the most valuable partner for the US/NATO alliance in an effort to counterbalance Russian activism in the region” (Gurcan 2021b). Thereby, Güller argues, Turkey is inclined to, once again, undertake the role of a “subcontractor” (*taşeron*) for the US on the rimland to contain Russia by leveraging its geostrategic location, maritime control, and military know-how (Güller 2021b). To explore the role of political-economic factors in the strategic re-direction since 2016, the following section reviews the associations between Turkey’s quest for agency and energy geopolitics in the regional subsystem as well as legitimization of policy choices in the domestic arena.

2. Political-Economic Factor: Resource Competition and Energy Security

Energy geopolitics is another common theme in discussions of the Blue Homeland strategy, and it is important to review the literature to identify area(s) for contribution. As Turkey seeks to expand its sphere of influence, challenge the status quo, and gain a competitive advantage, resources in the global commons shall necessarily play a role as both a target and tool of said expansion (Ladislaw and Tsafos 2019). Fareed Zakaria defines “state power” as the portion of national power that can be extracted by the government for its purposes; it reflects the ease with which decision-makers can achieve their ends (Zakaria 1999, 9–11). Since grand strategy is a guideline on how to use “national power,” energy’s “dual attributes in relation to a state’s economy

as a source of growth and sovereignty as a strategic asset render it a ‘source of relative power’” (İşeri and Bartan 2019, 113). Emre İşeri proposes that “owing to its inherent characteristics of *imminence* and *immediacy*, energy is a particularly elusive policy domain...it should be examined as a distinct referent object” within which securitization can occur (İşeri 2019, 258–59). This section provides a survey of the literature that explains more generally the ties between energy security, economic prosperity, and security in Turkey. It also includes a review of important sources that discuss if/how energy security factors into the Blue Homeland maritime policy.

2.1. Economic Development and Energy Geopolitics

The failed coup attempt in 2016 provided Erdoğan the “golden opportunity” to consolidate his power and re-define himself in the domestic arena as the champion of a neo-nationalist economic agenda (“Where Turkey Goes Next” 2016). Specifically, due to the country’s high dependence (70%) on the import of hydrocarbons, energy security for Turkey would accompany access to affordable, sustainable, and reliable resources to maintain an annual GDP growth rate of 5%+ (*Daily Sabah* 2020). In a state-sponsored documentary titled *Mavi Vatan*, Yaycı argues that the quest to access offshore natural gas deposits is the main driver of the Blue Homeland project (TRT Haber 2021a). He adds that “75% of Turkey’s oil imports pass through the Aegean Sea” (Yaycı 2020b, 1), thereby raising the stakes involved in maritime jurisdiction. This is an important aspect to consider, as “international challenges strengthen the domestic political hand of military/autarkic cartels by demonstrating the need for expansion to achieve a self-sufficiency” (Snyder 1991, 56). Since “foreign policy presents itself as a glorious terrain for injecting hope to a demoralized population” (Paipais 2013), Erdoğan has pursued an activist strategy to highlight Turkey as an important player in regional energy geopolitics by diversifying its market mix, supply routes, and portfolio of contacts since 2016. His promise to reduce Turkey’s energy import dependence and

alleviate political-economic vulnerabilities remains a central pillar of the policy of prestige within the country. Thus, the Minister of Energy, Fatih Dönmez declares: “we will search every square meter of our seas for Turkey’s energy independence” (AA 2020).

Regarding Turkish activism, Oya Dursun-Özkanca writes: “through its energy policies, Turkey engages in boundary testing against the West by the use of informed strategic non-cooperation and collaborative balancing with Russia” (Dursun-Özkanca 2019, 98). Turkey’s precarious relationship with Russia is certainly a delicate act of geopolitical balance; a partnership of convenience or “conflictual connivance” (Pierini 2021) rather than a “strategic alliance” (Barmin 2019). The 2020 US Congressional Service report also observes how “growing Russian-Turkish relations are situational rather than comprehensive in scope” (Zanotti and Thomas 2020). As the second-largest export market (after Germany) for the Russian state-owned gas company *Gazprom*, Turkey runs large and persistent deficits in bilateral trade. Yet, such “asymmetric interdependence” is reflective not only of the material trade-offs but also “the worldview of the Turkish political elite and their self-conception of country’s national identity as a Eurasian power” (İpek 2019, 135). According to Polat, “Turkey has been estranged from the Euro-Atlantic alliance due to clash of national interests and pushed out of the EU’s geopolitical sphere of influence for historic, cultural, and strategic reasons” (Polat 2015, 160–61). Thus, the country set out to locate novel avenues for its national and economic growth.

During supplier monopoly and perceived risks of militarized dispute, nation-states implement policies to improve their energy security (Cheon and Urpelainen 2015, 953). From the West’s perspective, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the monopolization of energy supply routes to Europe, and the recent assault on Ukraine have ultimately resulted in the energy consumers of the industrialized world to seriously consider pursuing hydrocarbon alternatives (Çubukçuoğlu

2014b). In this effort, the EU considers Turkey as a key partner and a major transit hub in the highly valued Southern Energy Corridor to reduce its dependence on Russia (Yabancı 2016, 9). On one hand, the quest to extend control over conflict hot-spots in the region from Syria and Libya to Nagorno-Karabagh has placed Turkey in a delicate position and attributed heightened importance to the energy corridors connecting producers of the East with demand centers of the West; on the other hand, the potential coercive use of energy as a weapon by Russia in regional conflicts added a risk premium on Turkey's economic outlook, thereby prompting the government to seek mitigation strategies against pipeline politics. These concerns paved the way for Ankara "to deal with the daunting task of 'synchronizing geopolitics and foreign policy with energy security'" (İşeri and Bartan 2019, 116).

Highlighting the role of ideational forces, Pınar İpek argues that this policy re-orientation is not only driven by "material interests to become an energy hub for Europe but also by the ruling elite's national identity conception of Turkey as a leader of the Turkic Eurasian region" (İpek 2019, 132). During the Davutoğlu era, AKP policy viewed energy as a "common denominator for regional peace" ("Vision 2023: Turkish MFA" 2011). This policy stressed Turkey's dual Islamic-Western identity for a strategic orientation to assert Turkey's weight in the post-Ottoman space by functioning as an energy corridor or a regional hub. As "Erdoğan's growingly nationalist-conservative discourse at home set the tone for Turkey's foreign relations" (İpek 2019, 141), the post-2016 era's branding strategy positioned Turkey as an energy center in its own right. This re-orientation represents a "genuine trading center in which energy hub characteristics have been complemented by massive energy investments" (İşeri and Bartan 2019, 112).

İşeri highlights that "the earlier process of de-securitization between 2004 and 2016, in which Turkey's discourse transformed from military posturing to regional cooperation and economic

interdependence regarding energy investments, shifted back to the traditional policy of securitizing energy after 2016” (İpek and Gür 2021, 7). Since this point in time, the quest to access, transport, and monetize energy deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean manifested itself in competing claims and coercive diplomacy over the delimitation/protection of (potential) EEZs among Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus (both parts) and the ownership of resources therein. Snyder offers an important insight in this context: “even status quo powers may resort to aggression to gain control over scarce resources that might otherwise be turned against them” (Snyder 1991, 21). Although Turkey itself did not discover energy deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean, the country disrupted alternative energy routes to Europe through the RoC and Greece, exemplified by Ankara’s refusal to permit the East Med Gas Pipeline project to traverse its EEZ (Stamouli 2022).

2.2. Turkish Foreign Policy and Energy Security

With regard to the role of energy security in foreign policy formation, Andrew Cheon indicates that countries investing heavily in their military react to hostile security environments by “implementing domestic policies that reduce their dependence on imports” (Cheon and Urpelainen 2015, 954). The latest IEA country report confirms that as a result of energy security vulnerabilities generated by a reliance on imports for natural gas, “Turkey’s overarching priority is to reduce the share of imported gas and increase the share of domestically produced energy resources” (“IEA: Turkey” 2021). In line with this perspective, Lisel Hintz observes that “what Greece and the RoC deem to be Turkey’s ‘illegal’ drilling may indicate a desire to avoid becoming too dependent on Russia and Iran for energy” (Hintz 2019b). Further, Turkey’s heightened interest in developing gas fields in the off-shore Black Sea region since 2019 carries regionwide implications in its promise to further reduce import dependence on traditional suppliers such as Russia. John Bowlus adds that “Turkey’s renewed focus on projecting maritime power through its Blue Homeland

strategy dovetails with its goals of blocking competing gas flows, securing liquefied natural gas imports, and exporting its own gas from the Black Sea later in the decade” (Bowlus 2020).

While trying to enhance energy supply security, the AKP government appealed to popular national-religious narratives to gain points in favor of energy explorations. The state-owned TPAO launched *Fatih* (conqueror), a drilling vessel, to the Black Sea on May 29, 2020, on the occasion of the 567th anniversary of Constantinople’s (Istanbul) conquest by the Ottomans in 1453 and the official re-conversion of the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque (Cevrioglu 2020). Drawing from the symbolic meaning associated with the day, Erdoğan stated: “We preserve and protect the interests of our country not only in the territory of 780,000 km² of homeland, but also in the Blue Homeland line... I wish success for our *Fatih* drilling vessel’s mission, which started on this special day” (T.C. İletişim Başkanlığı 2020). However, Turkey is not unique in its act of nationalizing maritime commons and linking political goals to historical symbols. For instance, consider that the RoC named the natural gas reserve discovered in Block 12 of its EEZ in 2010 as ‘Aphrodite’;¹⁶ Considering the relationship between identity politics and energy security, Thanos Koulos highlights that “the Greek Cypriot government attempts to ‘Hellenize’ the maritime space and verify its ownership [to energy fields] with ethnic symbolic terms” (Koulos 2018, 15). Another scholar applying a constructivist approach, Alexis Heraclides, argues that “this ethno-symbology suffers from ‘retrospective ethnicization’, where *ethnies* themselves are social constructs just like nations, established over time or invented, and forged together often arbitrarily” (Heraclides 2008, 178). Turkey’s response to the finding of the Greek Cypriot gas accompanied its own symbology of *Mavi Vatan* a decade later in 2020-2011; although several Turkish critics including Yaycı

¹⁶ In Greek mythology, Aphrodite is the goddess of beauty and love. According to myths, she was born from foams of the Mediterranean Sea in Paphos, Cyprus. Koulos writes that “Greek Cypriots claim a historical continuity of the Greek culture since the arrival of the first Mycenaeans on the island in the fifteenth century BC till the present day” (Koulos 2018, 16).

believe that “it was too late” due to the AKP’s reactionary, reluctant maritime policy that harmed the country’s geopolitical standing and energy security (Yayci 2021).

However, fortune turned in Erdoğan’s favor when the Black Sea explorations revealed a significant reserve that provided a much-needed boost to his morale and prestige at home. Discoveries of an estimated total of 540 bcm gas deposits with an alleged market value of \$120 billion provided the AKP with the impetus to celebrate Turkey’s 2023 centennial roadmap for energy supply security for the next decade. Upon reaching a peak production volume of 15 bcm/year in 2028, the Black Sea gas is expected to meet “30% of Turkey’s annual demand” (“TRT Haber” 2021b). In opposition, critics such as Necdet Pamir from the CHP’s Energy Commission dismiss premature claims to the accuracy of such findings as “economically recoverable reserves”; he argues that Turkey will inevitably be required to “continue [importing] gas to meet its domestic needs” (Deutsche Welle 2021). Yet, the move resulted in a grand upsurge of optimism among government circles, such that the Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EPDK) hurriedly announced: “the offshore Black Sea gas volumes will be open for trading in Istanbul on October 1, 2021, on a futures gas market to stabilize gas prices and de-risk trading” (Widdershoven 2021).

2.3. Regional Alliances and Energy Geopolitics

As the AKP government embarked upon offshore energy exploration in 2018-2019, the deterioration of Turkey’s relations with much of the Middle East aggravated its isolation from energy partnerships and turned it further inward for import substitution (Çubukçuoğlu 2020a). Although the US had brokered a reconciliation agreement between Israel and Turkey in 2016, ties broke down again in 2018 following US President Donald Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the IDF killing of Palestinians “protesting the US embassy’s move to Jerusalem” (Hintz 2019a). For effective, durable peace and stability that is conducive to

energy trade, Winrow argues that the “regions and empires” storyline that originates from the neorealist perspective ought to be replaced by a “markets and institutions” thesis from the neoliberal tradition; however, he concludes that the former argument appears to be more appropriate to explain the current situation after all (Winrow 2016, 434, 444). İşeri considers “the Eastern Mediterranean [as] a unique region, where the European and Middle Eastern regional complexes overlap” (İşeri 2019, 257). Accordingly, Israel, Egypt, Greece, and the RoC founded the EMGF in January 2019 at a ceremony in Cairo with support from the US to unite littoral states in the region, except Turkey (Figure 3 below). This forum was designed around a common goal to prepare, coordinate, interact, and develop common positions in energy security. This is a regional security complex, “a sub-system of security relations existing among a set of states whose fate is locked into geographical proximity” (İşeri 2019, 258). The landmark project proposal for the EMGF was to export Israeli and Cypriot gas to continental Europe via the “East Med Gas Pipeline” that could supposedly catalyze a peaceful reunification in Cyprus and fund re-settlement costs (Tanchum 2020c; Çubukçuoğlu 2020a).

Figure 3: Inauguration of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, 2019



Source: Enerji Günlüğü, 2019

Much like the “Quad of Indo-Pacific maritime security cooperation against China” (Babones 2021), the EMGF aims to tamp down Turkey’s brinkmanship across the region. Farrell and Newman argue that “states with political authority over the central nodes in the international networked structures through which money, goods, and information travel are uniquely positioned to impose costs on others” (Myers Jaffe 2019). Over the past two years, this forum has acquired a defensive dimension sealed by several tri-partite agreements including participants from afar such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and France. However, Brenda Shaffer, a senior fellow of geopolitics and energy security at The Atlantic Council, opines that it was a “huge mistake” to leave Turkey out of this group of countries (Surkes 2020). Agreeing with this line of thought, Nikos Tsafos, a senior fellow on energy security and climate change at the CSIS, states that the “EMGF cannot be a productive regional forum without Turkey” (Tsafos 2020). In their view, Turkey’s unilateral pursuit of offshore hydrocarbons in the high seas is a result of the impression that “it is left out of the energy game” (Tsafos 2020).

Figure 4: Navy-Army Joint Maneuvers during the Mavi Vatan Naval Exercise, 2019



Source: Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü, 2019

Evidently, Turkey launched the largest naval drill to date, also dubbed Blue Homeland, in March 2019 (Figure 5 above) partly in “response to the establishment of the EMGF one month

prior” (Lindenstrauss and Winter 2020). Connor Murphy observes that “any naval exercise which utilizes over 100 ships asserts bold rhetoric... seeking to project maritime power not only to its neighbors but also on the global stage” (Murphy 2020, 42). Providing further context, Sinan Ülgen suggests that “Turkey’s maneuvers were, in reality, a reaction to the consequences brought about by the strategic mistake that enabled Cyprus to become an EU member despite its ongoing political division” (Ülgen 2020). The implication is that Turkey made use of maritime brinkmanship on behalf of Turkish Cypriots to claim a “fair share of the gas bonanza” (Tamma 2019) and participate in the Mediterranean gas monetization projects. It is no wonder then that this broader reconfiguration in energy geopolitics coincided with the delivery of Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missiles to Turkey in July 2019, which ultimately “heralded an era of Ankara’s repositioning partly outside the Atlantic alliance” (Pierini 2021). Ankara’s adoption of an assertive foreign policy is explained hereof by the reaction against “attempts to shift regional power balances at the expense of Turkey’s ambitions to become a regional energy center” (İşeri and Bartan 2019, 118).

2.4. Energy Transition and Regional Implications

Certain critics warn against excessively relying on energy geopolitics to explain Turkish behaviors. Mehmet Ögütçü believes that underlying factors in the Mediterranean maritime dispute are less concerned with energy rights and have more to do with “geopolitical influence, sovereignty, and freedom of navigation” (Ögütçü 2020). Nathalie Tocci from the EU High Representation agrees that “gas is not the driver of developments in the Eastern Mediterranean,” adding that “politics drives, gas follows” (D. C. Ellinas 2020). Many countries around the world leapfrog toward renewables with the intent to reduce carbon emissions. Charles Ellinas confirms that the EU’s pledge to reduce emissions by 55% in 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 implies that there is no demand for the Eastern Mediterranean gas in Europe (D. C. Ellinas 2021a).

This is compounded by the fact that the EU and the European Investment Bank have cut funding for oil and gas infrastructure “in fear of obstructing the bloc’s climate mitigation goals” (“Crisis Group: Turkey-Greece” 2021). The US Ambassador in Greece, Geoffrey R. Pyatt, highlights that “the ground is shifting quickly; much of those oil and gas resources will never be extracted and we have to re-evaluate the energy conversation from this angle” (CEPA 2021). Simply put, there are misperceptions about expected windfall profits from energy deposits in the Mediterranean. While the recoverable amount is significant, there are political, market, and financial risks in a rapidly changing energy landscape in addition to the enormous engineering challenge of extracting and transferring these resources to demand centers around the world. Moreover, they make up only 5% of the global recoverable amount, incapable of swinging the markets in any specific direction, compared to, for instance, 30% in the Arctic region (U.S. EIA 2013). Therefore, global energy transition and decarbonization disincentivize expensive, risky offshore exploration activities and negate the role of hydrocarbon potential as a causal factor in Blue Homeland strategy.

Despite the clear lack of economic feasibility, the energy issue has been increasingly politicized by countries in the EMGF. Ellinas claims that “with its future energy needs well covered at competitive prices, Turkey has no need for Eastern Mediterranean gas... Its aggressive actions over the last few years are not energy-driven, particularly as the areas it claims to be part of its continental shelf have low probability of gas presence” (D. C. Ellinas 2021b). Furthermore, despite proposals to evaluate a “peace pipeline” (Winrow 2016, 144), such as the “East Med Gas pipeline” under the EMGF’s sponsorship, there is no evidence elsewhere that trading in energy is an incentive for dialogue or a catalyst for regional peace (Shaffer 2014). Contrary to predictions of the liberal tradition that point to the pacifying effects of economic interdependence, the causal arrow moves in the other direction: energy trade reflects existing peaceful relations rather than

creating them. In fact, disputes over “energy resources can exacerbate existing political conflicts” (Shaffer 2013; Tziarras 2021), which implies that the Cyprus Problem spilled into the sea and precipitated a dispute concerning maritime rights. At the heart of the geopolitical conflict in Cyprus remains the age-old “contested authority and governance on the island” (“Natural Gas: The New ‘Green’ Resource Curse?” 2020, 8). “It is the tenor of the talks for reunification that shapes, whether gas is seen as a problem or a solution, not the opposite,” says Tsafos, adding that “this experience is largely in line with how gas has affected bilateral political relations elsewhere” (Tsafos 2018). The blessing of hydrocarbon wealth might often turn into curse, as seen in other parts of the world, such as the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and the Arctic Ocean (*The Economist* 2017). In line with this statement, İşeri argues that energy cooperation in Cyprus is a “failed example of functionalist assumptions” (İşeri 2019, 266) that expected economic benefits from exploiting energy resources to spill over into the realm of political issues and “incentivize the countries of the region to transform their conflictive patterns of interaction into peaceful ones” (İşeri 2019, 257; Türkeş-Kılıç 2019, 181).

Applying a neoclassical realist framework, Tziarras explains that in response to changing threat perceptions toward Turkey’s rising relative power, the RoC adopted a “more proactive foreign policy of external balancing by forming trilateral energy partnerships ” (Tziarras 2019, 54–68). Indicating toward changes in the regional distribution of power, he argues that the “sense of imminence regarding the clarity of the Turkish threat increased significantly in the 2010s especially with Cyprus’ energy security” (Tziarras 2019, 66). About higher clarity of threats in accordance with the realist paradigm, Ülgen observes that “off-shore energy potential has a detrimental effect on political negotiations in the region” (Columbia Global Centers 2020), while İpek and Gür challenge such an approach to analyzing energy geopolitics and employ a

constructivist prism. They propose considering “the role of ideational forces in forming threat perceptions and cognitive priors functioning as filters in the selection of material interests between 2010 and 2020” (İpek and Gür 2021, 15). Beyond rational cost-benefit calculations, these observers emphasize cognitive processes that policy elites engage in to frame issues and make policy decisions from a political psychology perspective. Instead of “top-down securitization shaped by systemic constraints,” their argument regarding the emergence of EMGF concurs with “the pattern of bottom-up regionalization” as an outcome of “historical processes and interactions over time” between Israel, Egypt, Greece, and the RoC. Their conclusion partly echoes Aviad Rubin and Ehud Eiran’s earlier study, which posits that Turkey’s exclusion from the regional security complex (hence, its power balancing acts for energy rights) is because of “lack of shared values, culture, and norms; protracted conflicts among Turks, Greeks, and Cypriots; and the narrow scope of cooperation in a single subject area (natural gas)”. Complementing İpek and Gür’s analysis, Heraclides astutely observes that “Turks are less clear-cut in their grand national narrative, and as a result tend to be, more insecure and defensive about their national identity than Greeks” (Heraclides 2008, 179). To further explore this topic in the context of Turkish domestic politics, the following section reviews existing scholarship on the evolving role of nationalism and domestic moderating factors in producing foreign policy responses to systemic challenges.

3. Domestic-Political Factor: Nationalist Discourse

A third strand of the relevant literature positions the AKP’s nationalist turn as an important contributor to Blue Homeland’s ascendance since 2016. Encompassing research on developments from Turkey-EU relations to the Arab Uprisings and the failed coup attempt, this section provides a survey of the literature on if/how nationalist sentiment contributed to foreign policy in the post-2016 period and what role, if any, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society

relations played as moderating factors in the policy shift. It highlights arguments in previous studies that as Turkey-EU relations deteriorated, democratic backsliding and the rise of populist policies ushered in the politicization of the judiciary, military, as well as growing authoritarianism under Erdoğan's expanding powers. These arguments lend support to claims that authoritarian elites' policy focus on the Middle East and Eurasia dovetailed with nationalist policies supporting Turkey's maritime activism against Europe.

3.1. De-Europeanization and Politicization of Blue Homeland

Lisel Hintz observes that for the period between 2004 and 2010, the “Islamist AKP used the EU accession process to weaken Republican Nationalist obstacles in Turkey, thereby opening up space for Islam in the domestic sphere and a foreign policy targeted at achieving leadership in the Middle East” (Hintz 2018). This “opening” coincided with the notable changes in public perception of Europe as pro-Western Turkish liberals presented the EU as “the answer to all ills in Turkey” (Ünal 2004). During the peak of democratic reforms, EU officials praised the AKP as the “best government Turkey has ever seen,” while also reaping political-economic concessions without the burden of making any substantial progress in accession negotiations with Ankara (Manisalı and Akdemir 2013, 166).

Even during this period, secular-nationalist Eurosceptic scholars in Turkey who support Blue Homeland today, such as Erol Manisalı and Hasan Ünal, criticized the EU's double standard and trade imbalances in response to the Customs Union agreement in 1995. As early as 2002, and before the AKP came to power, a sarcastic article titled “The Roasted Turkey”¹⁷ documents how Ünal accuses the EC's ambassador in Ankara (Karen Fogg) of “acting like a colonial governor”

¹⁷ The editor-in-chief of *The Spectator*, which published the article, was Boris Johnson, who met with Hasan Ünal in the UK. Ünal says that he convinced the late historian Prof. Norman Stone to teach at Bilkent University in the 1990s and that Stone was Boris Johnson's former professor at Oxford University (Ünal int 2021).

(Ünal 2002). In their current analysis, critics of the realist school argue that the all-or-nothing approach – the platonic love affair to join the EU at any cost between 2004 and 2010 – brought Turkey to a disadvantaged position, thereby debilitating its security and prosperity (Yazıcıoğlu 2017). From a different angle, Alioğlu Çakmak criticizes institutionalist approaches to Turkey’s EU membership prospects. She argues that, after 2005, “economic crisis, migration issues, and geopolitical challenges decelerated normative transformation toward European values, diminished creation of a new European identity among Turks, and introduced a period of ‘de-Europeanization’” (Alioğlu Çakmak 2019, 296).

The earlier honeymoon period with the EU ended when the AKP started attributing its attention to the Middle East in 2010, becoming involved in the Arab Uprisings from 2011 onwards through proxy warfare and reneging with democratic backsliding at home. While nationalist sentiment rose as peace talks (*çözüm süreci*) with the PKK collapsed in 2015, some observers viewed the decisive turn to nationalism as having occurred in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Alain Gabon opines, “That night, a lot of things changed with respect to Erdoğan’s understanding of his ‘NATO allies’ and EU ‘partners’” (Gabon 2020b), some of whom remained complicit and passive, issuing vague statements about restoring calm instead of backing the legitimacy of an elected government (Hayatsever 2016). Especially after the failed coup attempt, Etyen Mahçupyan, former chief advisor to Davutoğlu, observes that “Erdoğan had to reach an entente with one of the three major forces in the country: the PKK, the Gülenists (FETÖ, whom the AKP blames for the coup attempt), and the military; as the fight with the Gülenists followed, and the war against PKK restarted, he had no choice but to turn to the military” (Karaveli 2017). This was not inconsequential; Jason W. Davidson et al. argue that the orientation of a state is determined “not only by its relative power and position in the system, but also by the degree of influence that

nationalists and the military have within the domestic political coalition” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 30).

The AKP’s entente with the military came at the price of an aggressive foreign policy, more resources, and space to lobby for the secular-nationalist wing among the influential cadre of retired officers who formulated the Blue Homeland strategy. According to Areteos, the failed coup attempt in 2016 acted as a “political catalyst for the synergy between two central dynamics: Islamism and *ulusalcılık*”¹⁸ (Areteos 2021, 4). Rehabilitated and restored to positions of influence within the Turkish military establishment, these officers began building a partnership with the AKP administration (Grigoriadis and Tanchum 2021). Regarding the AKP’s decidedly nationalist turn, Dalay writes: “the government paved the way for the Blue Homeland doctrine to become more mainstream and gain more supporters among the governing elites in Ankara” (Dalay 2021). Through this action, the AKP did not necessarily benefit from Blue Homeland’s expansion per se, but in return, it profited from what Snyder identifies as “the nationalism, social solidarity, and social mobilization that go along with it” (Snyder 1991, 15).

Some scholars argue that “states captured by inward-looking nationalists will pursue policies of military competition” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 72) or “overexpansion” (Snyder 1991, 15). Thus, when power was concentrated in Erdoğan’s hands following the 2017 constitutional referendum and the AKP-MHP alliance’s victory in the 2018 presidential elections, “the government moved to a yet harder line in its Eastern Mediterranean policy” (“Crisis Group: Turkey-Greece” 2021). Due to this “coalition logrolling” (Snyder 1991, 17) between the AKP and nationalists, even without the officially sanctioned approval, Blue Homeland was viewed as a symbol and “achieved incredible influence” (Murphy 2020, 38) in the eyes of the public.

¹⁸ *Ulusalcılık* is a rigid, narrow interpretation of Kemalism. Please see Political Factions in the Appendix for more details.

Politicians often “frame, adjust and modify strategic choices to reflect culturally acceptable preferences to maintain domestic political support” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 70). To confirm this pattern, İpek and Gür examine “prominent frames used by decision makers,” and outline clear shifts in Turkey’s policy from a “cooperative economic and security discourse between 2003-2016 to a conflictual position between 2017-2020” (İpek and Gür 2021, 9).

The government’s capacity to mobilize people as well as its resourcefulness in the domestic arena are other important contributing factors in the context of assessing foreign policy choices. In relation to the act of “internal balancing” in the international arena, Gideon Rose introduces the concept of “national political power,” which he defines as “the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation’s human and material resources behind security policy initiatives” (Rose 1998, 163). Taliaferro et al. further expand on the idea of resource mobilization as a key intervening factor affecting domestic-level processes in the formation of foreign policy (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). In this regard, Erdoğan rode on the global wave of rising authoritarianism following the 2016 election of former US President Donald Trump, galvanizing support from his nationalist followers. Some observers claim that he embraced the Blue Homeland strategy partly to expand his political power base, develop a success story after repeated failures in the Middle East, and boost his approval ratings. One particular argument is that the AKP portrays Blue Homeland as a pillar of national sovereignty to rally public support against existential threats from rival alliances toward Turkey (Uzgel and Nas 2020). This correlates with Robert Ross’s term of “naval nationalism,” whereby maritime development could be explained as one component of a “prestige strategy” (Ross 2009, 46; Wang 2021, 8) that appeals to the national impulses of Turkish citizens.

Some scholars brand this nationalist policy as revisionism, a claim underpinned by Erdoğan’s depiction of the foundational Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and the Montreux Convention more as

restricting Turkey's potential than as diplomatic triumphs that crowned the national struggle led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Candar 2020b). Others regard it as yet another bullying tactic designed to boost his one-man rule or a "distraction to mask internal problems" (Kayaoglu 2020), such as the economic downturn or the loss of municipal elections in three major cities to the main opposition party in 2019. These critics echo the argument that "the shift that has taken place in recent years is not due to any structural change in US-Turkey bilateral relations, but more to developments within Turkey" (Hill 2021), characterized by uncertainty regarding what the future may hold for the AKP government. Moreover, the COVID-19-induced economic recession in Turkey put Erdoğan in a difficult spot as the Biden administration's decision to litigate the Halkbank gold-for-oil Iran sanctions-busting case compounded the uncertainty associated with his political career (Bjorklund n.d.). This may support the claim that a tide of populist nationalism often rises when the economy ebbs, speeding the decline of multilateralism and precipitating beggar-thy-neighbor policies (Reinhart and Reinhart 2020; Taş 2020, 14).

Yet, many scholars argue that the shift extends beyond Erdoğan's domestic political ambitions when it comes to national security. Uzgel believes that a "map-phobia" exists within Turkey's security paradigm, in reference to the Treaty of Sèvres¹⁹ (1920), which was designed to carve out the Ottoman Empire and subject it to military occupation by allied powers in the aftermath of World War I (Uzgel and Nas 2020). Gürdeniz finds similarity between the EU's Seville Map (2006)²⁰ for the sea and the Sèvres Map (1920) for the land due to its attempt to wrest away roughly

¹⁹ The Treaty of Sèvres represented dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire's remaining territories in Asia and North Africa by the Allied Powers of Britain, France, Italy, and Greece after the formal Armistice of Moudros in 1918.

²⁰ Two Spanish academics from the University of Seville's Department of Geography, Juan Luis Suárez de Vivro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Mateos, circulated in 2004 and published in 2006 a study sponsored by the European Commission known as the "Seville Map" that depicts potential EEZ of the EU. The map locks Turkey into a narrow area while granting oversized maritime zones to Greece and Cyprus. By extending a continuous EU maritime area of interest from Spain to Israel, the map embodies Turkey's worst-case scenario of being isolated in the Eastern Mediterranean and is frequently mentioned in media both by state officials and progenitors of Blue Homeland.

200,000 km² of marine area from Turkey (Figure 5 below) (Gürdeniz 2021b, 64; Taş 2020, 18). He describes the struggle for Blue Homeland as Turkey’s “second War of Independence against imperialist powers of the West” (Ulusal Kanal 2019). For the former CIA official Graham Fuller,²¹ this “Sèvres Syndrome” is an “emotive call for remembrance and a reminder to never again permit foreigners to cripple Turkey” (Fuller 2008, 28; Outzen 2021a, 6), which “the AKP leverages to mobilize popular support for Blue Homeland” (Uzgel and Nas 2020).

Figure 5: The Seville Map (2006), The Sèvres Map (1920)



Source: *Anatolia News Agency (2020), Deutsche Welle (2016)*

Other analysts argue that the issue concerns much more than just Turkey’s territorial integrity; for instance, Erdemir and Koduvayur claim that Blue Homeland extends beyond the country’s maritime domain. In their view, Erdoğan’s “ensuing dependence on ultranationalist and Eurasianist factions at home enhanced overseas ambitions that extend into the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean” (Erdemir and Koduvayur 2021). However, Ülgen disagrees, suggesting that “the navy officers behind the *Mavi Vatan* doctrine are not Eurasianists – rather, they are nationalists, the main difference being that the former are more pro-Russian whereas the latter are not” (Areteos 2021, 13). In either case, according to a poll by *Metropoll* regarding public attitudes toward Turkish self-perception, it was reported that “the new nationalism is assertively Muslim; fiercely

²¹ Graham Fuller and a few other US officials including Morton Abramowitz, the former US ambassador to Turkey, submitted reference letters for Fethullah Gülen in support of his Green Card application in 2008 for taking up permanent residence in Pennsylvania, US. This is still a highly controversial issue that haunts the US-Turkey bilateral relationship.

independent; distrusting of outsiders; and skeptical of other nations and global elites, which it perceives to hold Turkey back” (Halpin et al. 2018). However, the converse remains true as well: Johnston argues that “liberal democracies (e.g., EU) view illiberal, flawed democracies (e.g., Turkey) as part of the devalued out-group, zero-sum threats, and legitimate targets of violence” (Johnston 1995, 61) and that they “form overwhelming countercoalitions against autocracies” (Lake 1992, 24). Critics of Erdoğan argue that he banks on such grievances to call for a “rally around the flag” and “effectively mobilizes masses by anti-establishment, anti-Western appeals and plebiscitarian, clientelist linkages” (Eldem 2021).

3.2. *Domestic Institutions, Strategic Culture, and State-Society Relations*

As domestic politics tend to tap into broader nationalist sentiments, Gingeras observes that “Blue Homeland’s pervasive appeal in the country to loyalists and dissidents is a testament to Turkey’s foreign policy consensus among different factions and the enduring power of the Kemalist ideology” (Gingeras 2020). Gönül Tol echoes his indication that “*Mavi Vatan* is the culmination of Islamism and Kemalism instead of *ulusalcılık*” (Medyascope Plus 2020). In other words, Blue Homeland acted as a “glue” for the AKP to hold together disparate political factions ranging from Islamists to conservative nationalists and secular Kemalists (Uzgel and Nas 2020), and “maintain perseverance of the state” (*devletin bekası*) (Areteos 2021, 2). The ruling coalition around Erdoğan’s AKP reinstated and legitimized the idea of the state’s survival and utilized slogans such as “one nation, one state, one homeland, one flag” (*tek millet, tek devlet, tek vatan, tek bayrak*) to strengthen its authority (Moudouros 2021, 461–62). This is the reason for why Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis’s call for Turkey to “let go of the Aegean Sea if you want to join the EU” fails to resonate with the Turkish people (Kılıç Yaşın 2021b), as it undermines the state’s survival and the unitary *Vatan* concept. Nicholas Danforth concurs with Gingeras’ position,

adding that “Turkey’s most popular, most provocative foreign policies from the European perspective cut across party lines. Even if someone else was in power other than Erdoğan, there would still be a lot of problems” (Danforth 2020). Following the policy failures in the context of Syria, Cyprus, and the PKK, had Erdoğan offered any more diplomatic compromises in spite of the pressures from nationalists, “he would not have been able to maintain power” (“Crisis Group: Turkey-Greece” 2021). Therefore, the link between Turkey’s geopolitical positioning and domestic politics is much more robust than initially assumed (Yeşiltaş and Piriñçi 2020). In this regard, the AKP-MHP coalition bolstered his quest for “agency, independence, and leadership” for a “New Turkey... beholden to no one” (Hintz 2019b).

Figure 6: Erdoğan and the Blue Homeland Map at the Turkish Naval Institute



Source: Aydınlık (2020)

Indeed, several observers opine that the future has become uncertain for Erdoğan since 2016 and that, as a savvy politician, he capitalizes on Blue Homeland’s symbolic meaning to shape the perceived interests of his political constituency, mobilize disparate nationalists, and maintain control over his popular base. For Johnston, the use of symbols such as *Mavi Vatan* is associated with the “creation and perpetuation of a sense of in-group solidarity directed at would-be adversaries” (Johnston 1995, 58). Political entrepreneurs such as Erdoğan “prefer tight, intense

group identification to loose and inclusive identities” (Johnston 1995, 62). As the saying goes, a picture tells a thousand words. Using a photo op (Figure 6 above) that took place in front of the Blue Homeland map at the Turkish Naval Institute in 2020, Erdoğan tacked himself onto the popular narrative and associated the AKP with the brand image of an important occasion to increase his credibility in the public eye. For Ersin Elikoğlu, such a high-profile demonstration by the president is not merely a conscious manner to consolidate domestic support but also part of “a securitization campaign to create a perception of heightened stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean” (Elikoğlu 2020, 121).

This photo received an immediate rebuke from Greece in reaction to Erdoğan’s so-called “expansionist, neo-Ottomanist ambitions” over the Aegean Sea and islands near Turkey’s coastline (Güvenç and Filis 2020). Critics such as Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Nikos Dendias argue that the photo represents a conscious decision to legitimize the concept, supported by the fact that it was posted on the presidency’s official website (Duvar 2019). To contrast with Greece’s reference to transnational factors, Michael Doran argues that “the neo-Ottomanism thesis exaggerates the role of religious ideology and ignores the many other factors that influence Turkish behavior, to say nothing of the pragmatism with which Ankara manages them” (Doran 2021). Further, Areteos adds that “*Mavi Vatan* is not the ‘child’ of neo-Ottomanism, but the re-birth and hybrid transmutation of a Kemalist-*ulusalcı* creed of the 90s within the new intellectual, political environment” (Areteos 2021, 5). It is no coincidence that since 2016, Erdoğan’s posters often accompany Atatürk’s, and the “*Yurtta Sulh, Cihanda Sulh*” (peace at home, peace in the world) slogan attributed to Atatürk embodies certain behavioral axioms cited in the AKP’s nationalist strategic circles to describe the desired context (Çelik 2020). The “degree of nationalism” is an important component of the strategic culture (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 70); any

choices “framed in the language of the idealized level of strategy [such as in the *Vatan* and *Sulh* concepts] appears more legitimate and authoritative” (Johnston 1995, 59).

In the context of ideational forces, the broader notion of strategic culture acts as another key influencer to understand the effect of military establishment on the formation of national security policy. Humans are “cultural agents” (Gray 1999, 59), and strategic culture is commonly defined as a “system of symbols” (Johnston 1995, 46), the sum of “emotional reactions and ways of behavior” (Snyder 1977, 8), or a collection of “entrenched beliefs, worldviews, and shared expectations of a society” that originate from various historical sources (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 66). For Taliaferro et al., “strategic culture is the most relevant moderating factor that conditions how the state perceives and responds to the external environment” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 94). Johnston adds that, “if there is a persistent strategic culture, the central paradigm and related strategic preferences should be consistent across time and different strategic contexts” (Johnston 1996, 225). Malik Mufti convincingly traces strategic culture(s) throughout Turkey’s history, highlighting the basic dilemma between the dominant “Republican” paradigm and the “Imperial” counter-paradigm; between “cautious insularity” and “daring activism” in foreign and security policy (Mufti 2009, 3–4). Published in 2009 at the apex of Davutoğlu’s Strategic Depth policy, Mufti argues in his book that the “Republican” paradigm fell into a crisis, permitting the reassertion of a relatively more cosmopolitan and risk-taking alternative, especially with the rise of Islamism in the 1980s-90s (Mufti 2009, 4–6). In contrast, Outzen observes that “Turkish strategic culture is geopolitically oriented, with a long historical memory and an extreme trust deficit” (Outzen 2021a, 6). Compounding this partial definition, Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi add that “an important historical characteristic of the dominant culture is its enduring ‘defensive’ *realpolitik* orientation, due to practical necessities in defining the ‘nation’,

building a ‘nation-state’, and protecting its ‘territorial integrity’ since early republican years” (Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi 2020, 64–65). Moreover, high frequency of conflict, the efficacy of violence, and the zero-sum nature in Turkey’s disputes “gives way to hard *realpolitik* strategic culture and offensive strategies” (Johnston 1995, 47). Specifically, the strategic culture and national security policy since the 1990s has been centered on “active deterrence,” advocating military-backed coercive diplomacy to address regional challenges (Kasapoğlu 2022). With the goal to “deal with problems directly at their source,” the policy of deterrence aimed to “create room for independent maneuver within disputed zones [of the Mediterranean],” “deploy in cross-border operations in Iraq and Syria,” and “maintain overseas basing rights” such as in the cases of Albania and Somalia (Neset et al. 2021).

To trace the presence of a strategic culture in the extant literature on Turkey, the *Vatan* concept deserves special attention as a central pillar of Blue Homeland’s political symbology and wider appeal to the public. Gürdeniz’s description of Blue Homeland emphasizes that it is, in an exact sense, “Turkey’s center of gravity in twenty-first-century geopolitics” (Gürdeniz 2021e) and “an extension at sea and seabed of our homeland” (Gürdeniz 2020e). In the context of national identity and its various extensions, Behlül Özkan engagingly traces the shifting valences of the *Vatan* (Homeland) concept and its evolution alongside the *Millet* (Nation) concept to explain how Turkey “constructed its modern national-territorial consciousness” (Özkan 2012). Turkish scholar İlber Ortaylı elaborates that “the idea and feeling of *Vatan* derives from an interpretation of and emphasis on history” (Ortaylı 2021). Furthering this notion, Gürdeniz claims that Blue Homeland symbolizes Turkey’s extended national self-conception and “re-definition of the *Vatan* concept” (Gürdeniz 2020d). Therefore, his proposition extends beyond the definition of a maritime doctrine and claims to be a nationalization plan – a grand strategy for Turkey on par with Atatürk’s legacy

of the country's salvation. He introduces a new interpretation of the intersubjective structure of *Vatan* into the strategic culture, somewhat hinting at the influences of ideational factors on his policy prescriptions. Gürdeniz's close colleague Polat provides further details of the maritime homeland in his mind, adding that "Turkey's strategic direction in the 21st century should be over the 'Blue Homeland' toward high seas, including, but not limited to, scientific research, marine tourism, transport, offshore energy, fisheries, and mining" (Polat 2015, 242). Through dominant narratives such as the *Mavi Vatan*, Taliaferro et al. posit that a state can "re-construct its strategic culture over time" due to the "conscious agency of the national government" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 68). The employment of the concept of *Vatan* in strategic culture, which encourages personal sacrifices carried out for the sake of the state, "can aid in resource mobilization in support of national security policy" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 69). The greater the intensity and exclusivity of in-group identity in a state, as epitomized in *Vatan-Millet* symbols that define one version of Turkish nationhood, "the more that state tends to exhibit hard *realpolitik* characteristics as opposed to soft *idealpolitik* traits in strategic culture" (Johnston 1995, 60).

As per the view shared by İpek and Gür, such redefined causal ideas based on Blue Homeland "reflect the social construction of material and normative instruments in Turkey's foreign policy shift from cooperation to conflictual security" (İpek and Gür 2021, 17–18). In this process, leaders analyze their people's cultural codes and alienate others against their policies, an element that Türkeş-Kılıç calls "the re-securitization of the official discourse through threat constructions since 2010" (Alioğlu Çakmak 2019, 296). In this context, state-society relations reflect the degree to which "society defers to state leaders on foreign policy matters and renders public support for general foreign policy and national security objectives" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016,

71). As reported, “even among opposition parties on critical national issues like Cyprus and relations with the US/EU” (BBC News Türkçe 2021b), the “level of public support for [the AKP’s] foreign policy and national security objectives” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 71) remains persistently high.

Finally, the institutional structure of the state and the scope of leadership and authority under Erdoğan’s executive presidency are also key to deciphering Turkey’s foreign policy goals. Snyder observes that the degree of [interest group] logrolling in a country depends on “the character of its political institutions, with latecomers into the club of ‘industrialized democracies’ [e.g. Turkey] producing overcommitted, expansionist policies” (Snyder 1991, 18). For scholars of the realist paradigm, one implication of such overcommitment is that authoritarian-centralized states tend to “over-balance” their rivals when “confronted by dangerous external threats”; and conversely, those most prone to “under-balance” are “incoherent, fragmented states whose elites are constrained by domestic political considerations” (Schweller 2004; Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 74). From this perspective, one may claim that the change in regime through the constitutional referendum in 2017 to a presidential system *Alla Turca* “personalized power, paralyzed bureaucracy, and completely de-institutionalized policy-making in Turkey” (Eldem 2021), thus paving the way to over-balancing behavior through military measures in 2019-2020. Regarding the subordination of Blue Homeland’s legalistic-moralistic approach to the AKP’s political interests, Metin Gürcan observes that Turkey has adopted a militaristic, albeit short-term, approach in foreign policy due to expansive presidential powers: “Turkey’s offensive, revisionist foreign policy is devoid of both a grand strategy and a capacity matching ambitions under the executive presidency... trying to compensate for its risky loneliness with military activism” (Gurcan 2020). In Gürcan’s view, which draws parallels with Hans Morgenthau’s observation that “nations are

tempted to clothe their own particular aspirations and actions in moral purposes" (Morgenthau 1965, 10), Blue Homeland is simply an envelope to disguise Erdoğan's true designs for the region alongside political Islam. As the centennial anniversary of the republic approaches, Marc Pierini agrees that "Erdoğan needs to portray himself as the savior of a nation attacked on all sides so that he can cruise through the 2023 elections and centennial celebrations" (Pierini 2020).

To summarize, this chapter provided a thematic survey of the most important published sources about the Blue Homeland maritime policy. Recognizing the contributions of existing sources, a more comprehensive approach within a multi-layered explanatory framework could complement the rigor of arguments presented in the literature. To further explore the topic, the next chapter elaborates on the proposed methodology for answering the research question.

Chapter 3: Methods and Approach

As demonstrated in the previous chapter's literature review, much of the existing scholarship (with a few notable exceptions) is either journalistic, written by policymakers, or narrowly focused – either in terms of purely material interests and balance of power/threat dynamics, energy security considerations, or ideational influences such as neo-Ottomanism, Islamism, and Eurasianism. Although previous studies make significant contributions to the topic, most of them tend to explain the phenomenon using an all-or-nothing approach instead of a gradual evolution. In contrast, the present study intends to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the origins of the Blue Homeland concept, in addition to exploring the multiple causal factors that underpin its trajectory between 2004 and 2021. It complements previous studies by employing a longer-term perspective and focusing on the more fundamental contributing factors at two levels of analysis. These are the systemic and domestic (unit) levels that organize multiple factors shaping the outcome and complement previous studies with a more holistic approach. In the framework of this study, the system comprises the ordering principle of anarchy in international politics (Elman and Jensen 2014, 101; K. Waltz 2014, 109), the structure of arrangements and interactions between units (K. Waltz 2014, 104), and the distribution of capabilities among these units (K. Waltz 2014, 110). Under anarchy, the structure reflects the polarity of the world order, relationships, and alliances/rivalries that constrain foreign policy options available to states co-existing within a “self-help” environment (K. Waltz 2014, 107, 110). In this context, power is defined as the ability “to get one actor (unit) to do what it would otherwise not do” in a self-help system (Dahl 1957, 204). Thus, the distribution of power among unitary, rational state actors is the key determinant of each state's relative standing in international politics. The domestic level of the framework encompasses the influence of institutional arrangements, interest groups, and strategic culture that

moderate structural factors contributing to the outcome. Before applying this framework to the research question, the following section discusses this thesis' engagement with the neoclassical realist paradigm, the role of both systemic and unit-level factors in the analysis of policy outcomes, and the principal reasons for employing this paradigm rather than other theoretical approaches such as purely structural realism or constructivism. Finally, the chapter presents a model that may apply to a wider universe of cases of rising maritime powers for empirical study.

1. Theoretical Overview: Neoclassical Realism and the Proposed Model

This thesis applies a neoclassical realist approach to its study of foreign policy. This enables the incorporation of analyses of interactions between structural factors and stimuli at the systemic level with intervening domestic factors at the unit level (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 12, 32). Due to the state-centric nature of maritime power, the study treats the nation-state as the primary unit in the international system and considers each explanatory factor separately to outline causal inferences regarding their impact on the outcome. Structural realism (neorealism) focuses on power politics at the systemic level and offers a suitable baseline to analyze Blue Homeland's evolution in terms of material capabilities and exogenous interests. However, explaining the rise of this maritime policy through inherently security-maximizing state behavior over systemic incentives/constraints misses the fact that states are capable of pursuing security through different means and respond in a variety of ways to systemic stimuli under similar structural conditions (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 33–34). As Taliaferro et al. argue, for example, the “domestic political environment influences type and intensity of strategic choices pursued” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 4) in response to systemic stimuli. Consider how domestic-cultural contexts in Germany and Japan institutionalized pacific orientations in their political systems and, by extension, their defense policy during 1945-1960 (Berger 1996, 317–56). Even

status-quo states that wish to preserve the order may adopt offensive doctrines and use power as a means if deemed necessary for survival under anarchy. For instance, Britain's development of naval power in the 1880s-90s and engagement in the "Great Game in Central Asia" against Russia aimed to protect its sphere of influence and maintain its great power status (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 49). Essentially, structural realism falls short of sufficiently explaining that domestic factors such as strategic culture, institutional arrangements, interest groups, and legitimation can be considered sources of power and affect foreign policy outcomes. Likewise, focusing solely on the determinacy of domestic pressures to explain policy choices miss the influence of external constraints on state policy. In other words, factors at the agential and systemic levels combine to produce outcomes. As such, by identifying causal factors that capture the essence of the topic without resorting to purely structural or domestic-political arguments, the neoclassical realist paradigm provides the most comprehensive, nuanced, and compelling explanation of the policy outcome. The next section presents systemic-level conditions that may influence interactions among states and their foreign policy choices.

1.1. Systemic Level: Structural Factors and Systemic Clarity

Before analyzing the effect of domestic arrangements, it is important to elaborate on external causal factors that constrain state behavior in international politics. At the systemic level, the distribution of relative material capabilities modifies the set of strategic options and the intensity of policy response(s) pursued by actors within the system. Based on their capabilities, the presence of more than two great powers contending for political, military, and cultural influence may result in a multipolar world order, which is often characterized by a periphery of states around the multi-poles, vying for security and/or regional influence through defensive/offensive means (K. Waltz 2014, 110–11). The current study considers an increasingly multipolar world as the basis for

systemic-level interaction among states. To navigate this order, previous studies by Robert Jervis highlight “conflict as the representative picture of world politics,” focus “more on issues of distribution rather than efficiency,” and lend more credence to “power as an instrument and a stake” (Jervis 1999, 42–63). Stephen Walt, in his balance-of-threat theory, writes that “alliance decisions are based not only on the offensive power and geographic proximity of the foreign state but also on how aggressive its intentions are” (Walt 1987, 21–25). The proposed model suggests that regional actors have greater opportunity for engaging in power-balancing acts to counter perceived threats to their national interests and compete more effectively in the international system. Such choices consist of “external balancing” in the form of alliance/coalition-building to pool resources against an adversary or potential hegemon; and/or “internal balancing” by developing a state’s military and economic power (Bendel 1994, 5; Walt 1987).

In either form, balancing acts require a careful assessment of relative capabilities to effectively deter opponent(s). In an extreme condition, under-balancing may occur if a state “fails to recognize dangerous threats, choose not to react to them, or respond in ‘paltry and imprudent’ ways”; on the other extremity, aggressive, “disruptive strategies to counter potential threats” for the supposed aim of enhancing state security may aggregate as over-balancing (Schweller 2004; Nexon 2009, 347). An under-balancing state tends to rely primarily on international law, institutions/organizations, and soft power to try and deter its covetous opponents in a reactive manner (Schweller 2004). Here, it employs military instruments in a very limited capacity. Meanwhile, an over-balancing state may forego soft power altogether and rely heavily on ad-hoc alliances, arms procurements, and military interventions to overwhelm its opponents. The strategic environment that requires such balancing maneuvers around each state can be either “permissive” (favorable) or “restrictive” (unfavorable), based on the type and magnitude of threats/opportunities

faced by the state in the international system, thereby affecting policy outcomes (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 52). Furthermore, the permissiveness/restrictedness of the strategic environment in conjunction with the clarity of threats in the system influence perceptions of domestic political actors as determinants of foreign policy choices. This aspect is further discussed in the next section.

In addition to the international distribution of power, an important structural factor that influences policy choices is the “clarity of signals and information” in terms of “nature of threats and opportunities, level of immediacy/time horizons, and accuracy of optimal policy options” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 46). Among the attributes of clear threats are an opponent’s “revisionist strategies, improvements in relative material capabilities, and the formation of rival alliance(s) that may alter the regional balance of power” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 46). Clear opportunities include evidence of a state’s improving balance of capabilities vis-à-vis other states, a lack of resolve among other parties, and a formation of alliance(s) with greater aggregate power against rivals (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 47). Once a state determines a clear threat/opportunity, changes to the status quo in the external environment, accompanied by a time horizon, present stimuli to adopt active measures. Thus, the sense of imminence to respond, for instance, to an armed attack (from a clear threat) or to exploit energy resources (in a clear opportunity) is a systemic stimulus that a rational, unitary state may have to consider in its foreign policy calculus. This thesis employs a method that undertakes a slightly different approach than Taliaferro et al. as it considers “immediacy to act” toward perceived threats/opportunities as a systemic stimulus rather than a structural factor. This is similar to Walt’s “balance of threat” theory such that while power is deemed an important factor in foreign policy calculations, “it is more accurate to say that a state balances with or against a *threatening* power” (Walt 1985, 8). A

systemic stimulus is a change in the external environment that may have an impact on states (units) and the arrangements between them. Crisis in Ukraine (2022), for instance, is a stimulus that the NATO alliance must assess and react against, which, in the long run, may trigger a change in relations among allies and/or polarity of the world order. It is, therefore, more suitable for “immediacy” to be regarded as a stimulus due to the presence and pressures attributed by a certain time window to act in response to perceived threats/opportunities, as opposed to power shifts spread over a longer-term horizon.

1.2. Domestic Level: Opening the “Black Box” of Domestic Politics

The neoclassical realist approach presented in this study is chosen to improve on the “external determinist logic of structural realism,” complementing Kenneth Waltz’s neorealist argument in the realm of foreign policy. In doing so, it attributes causal importance to the domestic political arena. The model employed in this study argues that “strategy is not just a ‘conveyor belt’ between systemic stimuli and state behavior – or an output” (Lissner 2018), and instead must be viewed as an outcome of the interaction between structural and domestic factors. Considering states as the main unit of focus, the research analyzes the distribution of relative material capabilities, systemic stimuli, and domestic factors to explain how actors respond to challenges and opportunities presented by the anarchic international system and other states.

Neorealist approaches emphasize the dominance of structural factors for security in an “outside-in” fashion while the *Innenpolitik* theories stress the influence of domestic factors that are presented as “inside-out.” However, the neoclassical realist approach in this study “occupies a middle ground between the two” – while it privileges the external environment, the paradigm also opens the “black box of the state” (Rose 1998), assigning significant agency to domestic-level intervening factors that translate systemic pressures of self-help politics into foreign policy

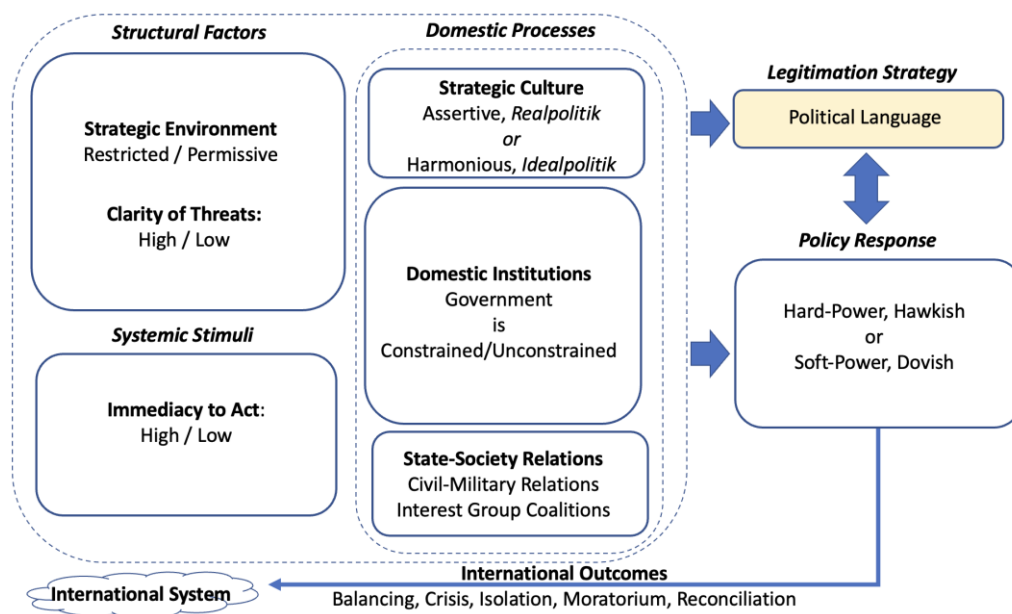
outcomes. Unit-level factors such as strategic culture, domestic institutional arrangements, and state-society relations may also “affect a foreign policy executive’s perception of the international environment, its decision-making procedures, and its ability to implement the policies it selects” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 34). Policy choices rely on the degree of constraint in domestic politics. Such constraints reflect the (in)coherence of coalitions, the presence of mechanisms that ensure checks and balances, the robustness of state institutions, civil-military relations, and the democratic/authoritarian tendencies of the government. The level of constraint varies across nation-states – a single-party, illiberal authoritarian government with lax check-and-balances, weak institutional memory, and lack of mechanisms to resolve state-society disputes is relatively less constrained, while a democratically elected coalition government with strong checks-and-balances, solid institutional memory, and robust processes to solve state-society disputes is relatively more constrained.

The type of regime notably impacts civil-military relations. While an unconstrained, authoritarian government tries to “bind the security apparatus to the ruling regime to such an extent that the two become mutually dependent on one another,” a constrained, democratic government observes the institutional division of duties and responsibilities, and engages less in the politicization of security forces (Escribà-Folch, Böhmelt, and Pilster 2020, 560). According to Taliaferro et al., civil-military relations are a “manifestation of the various domestic factors and reflect the elite consensus and power hierarchy between political figures and defense establishments” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 73–74). Significant military oversight defers security policy to the realm of defense elites, as they have “limited confidence in civilian institutions and regimes” (Sarigil 2011, 269), while a subordinate military provides technical expertise in the use of force to superior political authorities that formulate security policy.

1.3. Proposed Theoretical Model for Explaining Emerging Maritime Power Behavior

The analytical approach adopted herein postulates that a state’s alignment with changes in the dynamic distribution of power in the system is moderated by unit-level processes. Based on the analytical framework outlined in sections 1.1 and 1.2, the analytical framework in Figure 7 below summarizes the most salient structural factors, systemic stimuli, and domestic processes within the proposed model for foreign policy analysis of an emerging maritime power:

Figure 7: An Augmented Neoclassical Realist Framework for Foreign Policy Analysis



The enquiry also suggests that ideational factors such as “political language and legitimation” (Goddard 2008, 121) offer compelling explanatory power to augment the “Type III Neoclassical Realist Model” proposed by Taliaferro et al. in 2016 (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 34). Although Joseph Nye regards legitimation of international actions as part of “soft co-optive power” (Nye 1990, 166–67), this study treats legitimation as a complementary strategy that is applicable to both hard and soft-power policies. Legitimation strategies can be a source of *realpolitik* if they set “rhetorical traps by framing [state] expansion in a way that deprives opposing states (or domestic opponents) grounds on which to resist” or if they “resonate with a state’s ontological

security, that is, its need to secure its identity in international politics” (Goddard 2008, 112). In other words, if a state can make its power [hard or soft] appear “legitimate in the eyes of others,” it will encounter less resistance to its wishes and attract more followers for its policies, culture, and ideology (Nye 1990, 167). Especially “rhetorical appeals” (Goddard 2008, 121) to public and recognized norms to justify foreign policy” can be sources of power and moderate structural pressures. Consider, for instance, Bismark’s legitimation strategy in the 1860s that separately emphasized “treaty obligations, conservative principles, and nationalism” to different audiences and set a rhetorical trap to strengthen Germany’s argument (Goddard 2008, 110–42). By linking explanatory factors and legitimation strategies in a balanced and logical manner, the paradigm employed in this study underscores the distribution of relative material capabilities and the domestic context whereby perceptions of such conditions are filtered. It highlights the relevance of agency and political choice in the domestic arena that is critical to the course of foreign policy.

2. Concepts and Temporal Framing

For evaluating structural factors, the study employs measurements of national aggregate power sourced from various published indexes as indicators of a state’s material capabilities. This is followed by the need to measure the heightened importance of geopolitics and external pressures by operationalizing changes in its relative distribution of power and manifestations in maritime domains. This is carried out by tracking the significance of intergovernmental MoUs signed, partnerships/alliances formed, and military exercises conducted among littoral states in the region since 2004. To complement the research, the study also reveals the reasons for which power politics rise above institutional cooperation or arbitration in the context of Turkey’s maritime disputes. A simple ratio analysis is provided in the Appendix to outline the legal arguments of each party and determine the relative strength of their claims under international law.

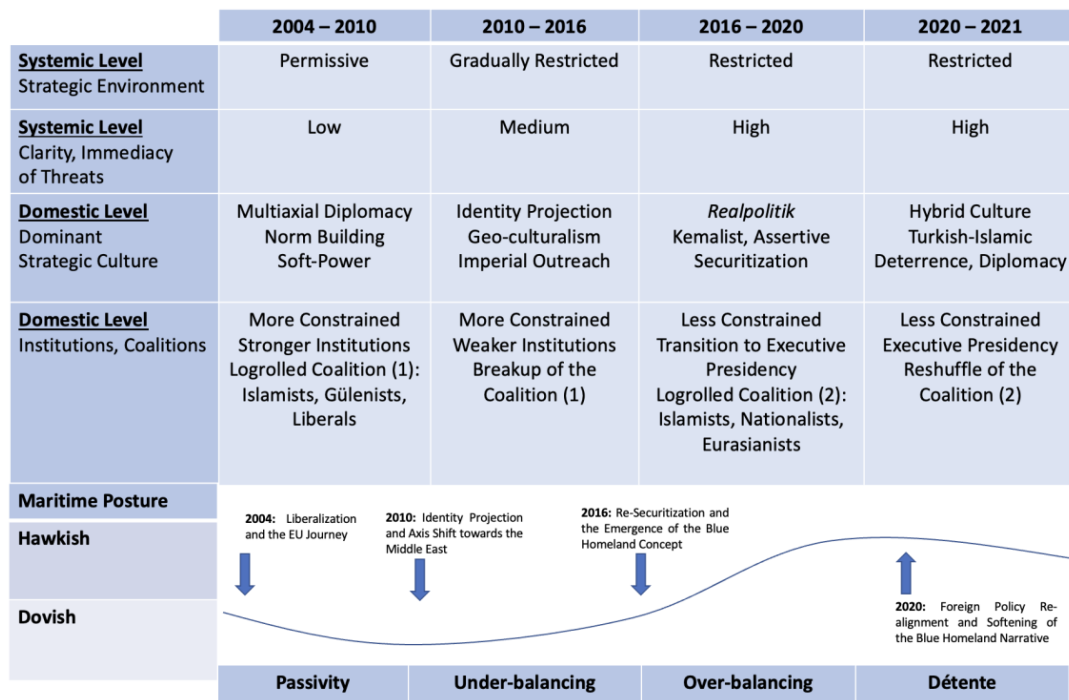
At the domestic-political level, the study examines Turkey's maritime policy by analyzing the concepts, experiences, and statements associated with the strategic environment and the role of strategic culture in Blue Homeland's development. Public statements of officials are vital sources of evidence for measuring the influence of intervening factors. A key component of the assessment involves scrutinizing symbols such as "frequently used idioms and phrases which are axiomatically accepted as valid descriptions of a strategic context" (Johnston 1995, 52); for example, the *Vatan* concept, aphorisms attributed to Atatürk, and statements from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other key elites. Historical analysis of the origins of Blue Homeland intends to identify whether the *realpolitik*, Kemalist strategic culture is consistent and persistent and determine whether a particular cultural paradigm (re-)emerged as dominant over another from 2016 to 2021. This is followed by an examination of domestic institutional arrangements such as constitutional amendments and the transition to the presidential system, while also exploring coalition dynamics in domestic interest groups and their effects on state-society relations. Lastly, the study assesses the AKP's use of political language, specifically its legitimation strategy regarding the *Vatan* concept. By applying the proposed framework, the study recognizes that it is not only domestic moderating factors that "make complex environments more manageable for decision-makers and suggest ways to respond to the environment," but also "external crises and intervening internal debates [that] determine which tendency kicks in and when" (Johnston 1995, 51–53). Therefore, the choice of this approach allows for a more comprehensive analysis of Turkey's case.

This thesis categorizes the temporal dimension of the phenomenon under investigation based on Turkey's foreign policy discourse more broadly in a *post hoc* fashion. Accordingly, there is a time lag in the studied period between the origins (1923-2004), emergence (2004-2010),

development (2010-2016), and the ascendance of the Blue Homeland policy (2016-2021). Choosing this method of periodization and time lag serves to reflect the changes in the domestic structure, geopolitical environment, and gradual responses of domestic-political processes to systemic stimuli over the course of seventeen years. These periods are pivotal for uncovering specific factors underpinning foreign policy formation, and for identifying various turning points in the overall trajectory of Blue Homeland. They illustrate policy choices under both structural and domestic constraints. During the initial phase of Blue Homeland between 2004 and 2010, Cyprus joined the EU as a *de facto* divided island and declared its EEZ in the Mediterranean in accordance with the EU Commission's Seville Map. Although the EU agreed to initiate accession talks with Turkey, the discovery of energy deposits and maritime agreements by the RoC negatively affected threat perceptions of the Turkish navy. Blue Homeland policy emerged in 2006 as a reaction to these structural challenges and systemic stimuli. In 2010, Turkey passed a constitutional referendum to establish a popular election of the president and granted broad jurisdiction to civilian courts such that they may try military officers. This was followed by a falling out with Israel over the Gaza Flotilla (*Mavi Marmara*) incident and the RoC's subsequent signing of an EEZ agreement with Israel. As progenitors of Blue Homeland were purged and jailed in political trials staged by Gülenists, Turkey de-prioritized maritime jurisdictions, adopted a reactive strategy against its challengers in the Mediterranean, and shifted its focus to identity projection in the Middle East. Later, in 2016, following a clash of interests in controlling the state apparatus and a political fallout with the AKP government, Gülenists orchestrated a coup attempt in Turkey, leading to major changes in Turkish domestic politics as well as foreign policy vis-à-vis the US and the NATO alliance. As Turkey re-enacted a securitized foreign policy under a nationalist-Islamist domestic coalition, Blue Homeland policy reached its peak in 2019-2020. This is when Turkey signed an

MoU/EEZ agreement with Libya, launched the largest naval exercise in its history (2019), and expanded its offshore energy exploration in the Mediterranean. In 2021, Blue Homeland reached a tipping point when the AKP cracked down on the group of retired admirals who submitted a controversial declaration that criticized Erdoğan’s Istanbul Canal project for its alleged erosion of the Montreux regime. As depicted in Figure 8 below, in addition to outlining foreign policy outcomes in the short term, the graph also illustrates how maritime posture supported Turkey’s strategic adjustment in the post-2016 era. Based on the periodization of the most important events, turning points in the graph reflect important shifts in the timeline of events between 2004-2021. Causal factors outlined this figure are further explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

Figure 8: Phases of Turkish Foreign Policy and Maritime Posture, 2004-2021



3. Data Collection and Method of Analysis

The background research undertaken for this thesis involved sources including documents in the public domain, public statements about academic, military, and diplomatic practices, and online content. The next phase of data collection consulted secondary academic resources. The

principal method of data collection consisted of interviews with key officials and relevant experts in Turkey, the US, the Middle East, and Europe. These interviews are understood as the basis for causal inference that complements the initial research. Since much of the debate concerning Blue Homeland revolves around Turkish, Greek, and Cypriot relations in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, most respondents in the study are from Turkey; others are from Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and the US. The sample of respondents represents a broad spectrum of opinions and ideological positions across the policy space in Turkey and abroad. Based on the initial research carried out using published resources to collect factual data, detailed questions are derived in preparation for each interview. There are thirty-one formal and thirteen informal interviews, amounting to a total of forty-four meetings. The questionnaires consist of a set of exploratory questions for each interviewee based on the respondent's managerial level, experience, and expertise. The flow of the interview is natural – in the style of organic conversation – with close attention to the response of the interlocutors and the revelations they offer. The language used in the interviews is English or Turkish, depending on each respondent's preference and fluency level. In-text citations include the word “int” to distinguish interviews from other sources of data in the report. As this study is exempt from the IRB oversight at Johns Hopkins University without any conditions attached, there was no requirement to review and approve the Informed Consent Form for the interview respondents.

The interview selection process includes respondents from the foreign service and defense bureaucracy who influenced Turkey's maritime policy or worked at the policy-making level in organizations that enjoy empirical access to data with a deep knowledge of regional security, diplomacy, and maritime affairs. The process also includes academic professionals and experts who researched, published, and influenced debates on Turkish foreign policy. Data derived from

interviews are analyzed to reach a conclusion regarding the explanatory power of the proposed causal factors affecting the policy outcome. Unless otherwise stated, respondents express their own views and do not reflect the official positions of organizations they are affiliated with. The identities of some respondents have been anonymized upon their request.

During data collection, constraints associated with time, travel restrictions, and the broadness of the research questions gave rise to certain limitations of the thesis. Due to the restrictions that emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the interviews were conducted over the phone, email, or web conference applications. Another potential hindrance is that some of the interviewees are in positions of power higher than that of the researcher, which adds an extra bureaucratic layer into the process and a corresponding demand to build rapport with interlocutors. Moreover, due to the sensitivity of the subject of national security, many potential respondents from the state bureaucracy refrained from participating in the study. For those who kindly accepted, there is an inevitable element of human subjectivity and interpretation that complicates the distinction between fact and opinion. Hence, it is important to maintain a healthy degree of skepticism in relation to the findings from expert interviews with state officials. Understandably, those who are in such positions do not disclose certain classified information or hesitate to mirror the reality of the phenomenon under examination, resulting in some offering their subjective views instead. Notwithstanding these considerations, the primary research, secondary sources, and interviews with experts who bring different perspectives from multiple countries triangulate each other by partially mitigating the impacts of subjective information that would otherwise misdirect the conclusion of the research.

To analyze this data once collected, the current study applies process tracing to empirical observations to evaluate the underlying factors that resulted in the outcome being focused on. To

this end, the first step is to analyze the “causal-process framework” (Brady and Collier 2010, 184) by establishing a timeline that lists the sequence of events in accordance with Blue Homeland’s trajectory. These events are considered the units of analysis within the research. For practical reasons, the process of case selection is sufficiently narrow, based on a diverse set of available events to be familiarized with by the researcher. The selection criteria are based on an event’s relevance to the topic and its tangible impact on the outcome. Major events, such as the official publication of the Seville Map (2006) in the EU, satisfy both criteria. Auxiliary events, such as the *Gezi Park* protests in Istanbul (2013), are not part of the main causal sequence, yet provide “valuable inferential leverage” (Collier 2011, 828) and are therefore included in the assessment. Excluded events are those that are outside the scope of this study or have no empirical, verifiable impact on the policy outcome, such as the Central Bank’s decision to hike interest rates and Erdoğan’s subsequent ruling to sack the Bank’s governor (2021). The study then explores the causal ideas, decisions, and actions embedded in the narratives of the identified events to make observations and find evidence that may validate or invalidate the theoretical model. It also seeks to determine if Turkey’s maritime strategy deviates from its actions on different policy issues and whether these actions are similar to those of other states in the region.

4. Research Constraints

Several independent factors may affect the outcomes of a research study, and this thesis is no exception. For the sake of feasibility, some factors that may bring additional explanatory power have been excluded from observation. Investment in maritime commerce, level of maritime education, and relative distribution of capabilities/skills among branches of the armed forces are merely a few of those that have been identified as extraneous variables. However, a more thorough analysis that considers these additional factors may bring interesting insights to the fore.

Additionally, while the research design aims to select explanatory factors that are clearly exogenous, there is an undeniable feedback loop between maritime policy and its after-effects on the international system. As a result, for instance, geopolitics may appear endogenous to Turkey's Blue Homeland strategy. To a certain extent, a given policy change may induce challenges that are precisely what the policy was originally intended to address. For example, Turkey's EEZ agreement with Libya in 2019 acts as a precursor to Greece's EEZ agreement with Egypt in 2020; thus, it may be argued that Greece's tit-for-tat strategy poses yet another geopolitical challenge in a cyclical manner that further intensifies Blue Homeland's purpose to address regional rivalry. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the proposition that the outcome is driven by perceived insecurity in the first place; in this context, the objective is to explore the main underlying factors that gave rise to the policy.

In its choice to adhere to the framework stipulated by the neoclassical realist paradigm, this study assumes that states strive to make optimal decisions while recognizing that leaders may not necessarily perceive objective reality accurately and respond rationally to systemic stimuli on a consistent basis. Yet, for practical reasons, the research plan excludes assessment of the leader's image as a causal factor in foreign policy outcomes. In a "personalist strongman regime" like Turkey (Aydin-Düzgit 2015, 119), it is difficult to ascertain where decisions are made and who has influence to what extent. For instance, Erdoğan's family members, his close circle of advisors, or external actors may play an important role in influencing his disposition to steer the course of events in one way or the other (Pitel 2020). The assessment recognizes that a leader's cognitive filters, personal biases, limits to processing information, and (mis)calculations may alter (mis)perceptions of systemic imperatives but regards their tangible influence on policy choices as minimal for the scope of this research. Leader images should matter most in the very "short-term,

when quick decisions are required, as in a crisis” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 91), such as the night of the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Since the scope of this research covers nearly two decades, the leader’s psychological make-up and personal mindset concerning strategic choices may arguably be epiphenomenal to other factors. Further investigation to address these shortcomings in terms of psychological, intellectual, and ideational factors in the empirical study may reveal deeper insights and complement this research. Another potential avenue for further research may be the role of media in shaping dominant narratives around Blue Homeland in Turkey. Its subject of focus could be the political economy of “power relationships” (Yeşil 2016) in media that governs the “materiality of knowledge production” (Bajoghli 2020; Bishara 2013, 35) and circulates information for the legitimation of Turkish foreign policy decisions in the eyes of its domestic audience. This may shed more light on the causal links between psychology, economics, and geopolitics. Finally, given the recent crisis in Ukraine and Russia’s belligerent posture, it may be fruitful to revisit energy security as a political-economic topic to reveal deeper insights into Turkey’s quest for survivability (*beka*) in a tumultuous neighborhood and how it relates to foreign policy choices concerning the maritime domain.

This chapter provided a theoretical framework to analyze Turkey’s foreign policy in general and Blue Homeland’s trajectory more specifically. Based on a critical review of available literary sources, it identified explanatory factors at systemic and domestic levels that offer a more comprehensive analysis of the policy outcomes in the period between 2004 and 2021 than previous studies on the topic. The following chapters apply this framework to analyze the modern origins of Blue Homeland policy before 2004 and subsequently its evolution until 2021.

Chapter 4: The Modern Origins of Turkey's Blue Homeland Strategic Policy

To specify and explore the factors contributing to Blue Homeland's origins before 2006 and its evolution thereafter, it is important to take a historical perspective on maritime geopolitics in Turkey to trace structural factors, changes in the relative distribution of capabilities, and the presence of strategic culture in naval development. This chapter reveals important insights about the geopolitical context of competition and foundational domestic influences that contributed to its emergence after 2006 to analyze causal factors behind Blue Homeland's significance. The first set of sub-questions it addresses are: "How did the foundational pillars of the Blue Homeland concept emerge? Is there a specific strategic culture that persistently contributes to foreign policy choices and maritime strategy?". The chapter also includes an analysis of how maritime law has evolved and why power politics has gained latitude over negotiations and international arbitration in solving Turkey's maritime disputes. The second sub-question it addresses is, "Why have hard-power policies risen above diplomatic and legal instruments to tackle disputes over maritime zones in Turkey's case?". This question explores shortcomings in the UNCLOS regime that perpetuate conflictual positions of parties with opposing maritime claims.

This chapter shows that besides "nationalism and the pursuit of status" (Ross 2009, 46), security considerations are an important contributing factor that drove Turkish maritime policy throughout the republican era. Structural factors in geopolitics combined with domestic political conditions to provide the bedrock for developing the material capabilities necessary for naval expansion and maritime control beginning in the 1960s. Naval officers steeped in a Kemalist strategic culture developed a vision to raise the country's profile to the rank of regional maritime power and increase both its prestige and its security by displaying gunboat diplomacy during crises periods, with greater intensity from the 1990s onwards. Blue Homeland as a concept emerged in

2006 based on these officers' perception of regional insecurity and mobilization of Kemalist culture to defend maritime interests. This concept provided the momentum to re-interpret Atatürk's earlier vision of maritime development and helped bring the maritime domain into public discourse as a pillar of securitization in New Turkey after 2016.

1. Fall of the Ottoman Empire and Atatürk's Maritime Policy in Early Republican Years

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918 at the end of World War I, Turkey was almost bereft of a navy, maritime industry, and skilled sailors. Building a fleet, and more importantly, using it as an instrument of foreign policy, was a daunting task; it was a process that required resources and time. There are certain milestones in the development of Turkish maritime policy that stretch back to the pre-World War I era and early republican years, where Atatürk played a leading role. His vision for Turkey's development became the growth engine of a country re-born from the ashes of defeat in 1919 against the allied powers of Britain, France, and Greece. The republic's founding ideology of Kemalism consisted of six key principles – republicanism, populism, nationalism, secularism, statism, and reformism – that set survival of the state (*beka*), territorial integrity, and security as top priorities to maintain Turkey's full independence (*tam bağımsızlık*) (Güvenç int 2022; Demirtaş Bagdonas 2008, 26–29). Among these principles, nationalism in particular stipulated anti-imperialism, self-sufficiency, and sanctity of territorial borders against foreign intervention. The message was that “enlightened people had to take the initiative in organizing the nation... but first the country had to be made secure” (Mango 2004, 262). Kemalism looked upon the West “as a reference point for Turkey's political and economic modernization and transformation” (Dalay and Keyman 2021), yet, also kept a consciously suspicious stance against aggressive designs that might upset Turkey's security such as Italy's revisionism in the 1930s. “Atatürk's objective was clear,” writes Mufti, “to create a republic strong

enough to defend and developed enough to hold its own technologically and culturally” (Mufti 2009, 17). To meet this objective, Atatürk demonstrated a great interest in the sea and set maritime consciousness as one of the many development goals that the republic should “achieve as soon as possible” (“Atatürk’ün Deniz Sevgisi” 2020). His directives reflect “love toward the sea” (*deniz sevgisi*) and efforts to set maritime power as a key pillar of the country’s security for achieving full independence.

The republic’s foundation in 1923 was a blank slate for Atatürk to construct the nation. He put processes in motion to shape the national identity, maritime interests, and strategic culture of the new republic. Accompanying his vision was a “strong cultural revolution and top-down modernization” (Taşpınar 2021). This revolutionary attitude was normal during the statist era of the 1920s-30s since the public sector occupied a major part as the enabler, builder, and coordinator of maritime modernization as it did in other aspects of life in the country’s resurgence. One such tangible reform was to grant coasting rights (*kabotaj*) on July 1, 1926, exclusively to Turkish-flagged vessels for the right to transport goods and passengers between Turkish ports. Highlighting this early attempt at nationalization, Tziarras says, “If you go back to the era of *Kemal*,²² you see that there is always great importance attributed to the sea as a vital space for defense of the country” (Tziarras int 2021). Ambassador (Ret.) Ertuğrul Apakan adds that “our strategy may not necessarily be defined as *Mavi Vatan* in the ‘Red Book,’ but Turkey’s maritime rights and interests have been included in our policy documents ever since Atatürk’s era” (Apakan int 2021). This was the initial phase of “naval nationalism” in Turkey (Kadercan int 2021), by which it would start to invest in a “prestige fleet” in an effort to “reestablish the country and culture as central to the region” (Wang 2021, 8), but avoid direct confrontation with major naval powers like Britain. As a

²² M. Kemal Atatürk.

“progressive leader” (Güvenç int 2022), Atatürk encoded his principles of the maritime nation into anecdotes that would provide guidance and inspiration for naval planners. Notably, on his visit to *Yavuz* battle cruiser at Gölcük naval shipyard in 1925, he said, “This mighty ship will serve greatly for you [the navy] as a capable platform and for us in foreign policy. It will make us proud” (Dz. K. K. 2021). As a symbol of the republic’s interest in building a fleet, *Yavuz* went through an overhaul and, upon Atatürk’s order, served in the “prestige fleet” that sailed to Greece and Malta in 1936 for public display and naval diplomacy.

Considering these early investments in building a fleet, historical reasons behind Turkey’s anxiety toward the maritime domain as a potential area of vulnerability to foreign intervention deserve due attention. Regarding Atatürk’s interest in maritime development, Güvenç draws attention to “a strong trend of continuity from the Ottoman to the republican era in diplomatic practice and quest for security” (Güvenç and Barlas 2014). “Turkey’s strategic culture is realist and defensive,” adds retired admiral and progenitor of the Blue Homeland concept, Cem Gürdeniz, “it dates further back to the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century and efforts to preserve its integrity” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Many of the interviewed experts highlight that modern-day Turkish maritime consciousness evolved from the events of traditional rivalry against and geographical proximity to Greece and Russia. Both countries played a central role in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as belligerents expanding against the Turkish empire. Due to a history of Ottoman naval disasters, i.e., Çeşme (1770), Navarinon (1827), Sinop (1853), and the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), the navy’s influence on the formation of Turkish maritime consciousness has been immense.²³

²³ Informal conversations with Turkish naval officers (anonymous) and Gürdeniz in 2021.

Recognizing the importance of losses over the last two centuries, Soner Çağaptay says that “there is a historic tendency in Ankara that Turkey should never be circled by Greeks in seas” (Çağaptay 2021). Further evidence of Turkey’s sensitivity to the maritime domain is Atatürk’s command of the War of Independence in 1922, when, as an army marshal, he unusually set the sea as the target and issued an order to “march to the Mediterranean” to pursue the defeated Greek army after a major victory on September 1, 1922 (Ülkekul 2021).²⁴ Contemporary naval officers regard this order as Atatürk’s directive to follow an activist maritime policy in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.²⁵ For the modern national consciousness, the liberation of Anatolia as a homeland in 1922 symbolizes “the end of the empire’s retreat since the Siege of Vienna in 1683” (Öksüz and Köse 2017, 208) and Turkey’s return to the seas as an independent country.

Despite the enthusiasm for maritime development in Turkey’s early days, “Domestic-political factors and military culture in the 1920s favored a coastal (brown-water) navy operating as an extension of the army in territorial defense” (Güvenç 2002) due to the dominant, land-centric mentality in the army and lack of hard-power capabilities during Atatürk’s era. For instance, Turkey had limited naval capabilities and barely stood against a powerful foe like Italy at sea when sovereignty issues over islets near the Anatolian coastline appeared on the government’s agenda in the early 1930s. The situation was so dire that when Italy threatened to occupy parts of southern Turkey, Ankara could not meet the challenge at sea; instead, it “fortified army barracks and asked locals to form a militia for self-defense in case of a foreign incursion” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021; Papuççular 2020, 47–51). This is evidence that, inasmuch as maritime development was the goal, Atatürk’s national transformation program aimed to “regulate and maintain internal order as a priority and had to relegate maritime affairs to the back seat role due to lack of resources” (Apakan

²⁴ The order in Turkish is “*Ordular: İlk Hedefiniz Akdeniz’dir. İleri!*”.

²⁵ Informal conversations with Gürdeniz and Sağdıç in 2021.

int 2021). Building a navy is a capital-intensive endeavor. Turkey did not yet have adequate capabilities and resources to assert its maritime presence in its geographic periphery. However, this did not preclude Atatürk from envisioning maritime power as an enabler of the country's forward-defense. The advice of his close colleague Rauf Orbay and his personal war-time experience served as guideposts for developing a set of principles that underpinned a strategic culture for the new republic.

1.1. Atatürk's Interest in the Maritime Domain and Kemalist Strategic Culture

Hindsight evidence suggests that in the 1920s, the ideas and experiences presented in the following sections were an important source of *realpolitik*. By keeping the maritime periphery open and accessible, strategic culture based on Atatürk's guidance for the state's forward-defense played a key role in perpetuating these *realpolitik* norms and passing traditions through generations over the next decades. These traditions offer a compelling explanation for Turkey's policy choices under systemic constraints, such as during the Cyprus Crises of 1964 and 1974. Atatürk's directive in 1924 was "... to think of maritime power as the great national ideal of the Turk and achieve it in a short time... It is our aim to have a perfect navy. The navy is not only a force that will protect the coast, but more importantly, it is a force that will ensure the security of the sea lanes. As we live in Anatolia, our need is greater in this respect" (Bener 2018; "Atatürk'ün Deniz Sevgisi" 2020). This is the main historical source that set out his expectations on how the state should perceive and respond to the external maritime environment. Following sections elaborate on how Atatürk's directive conditioned the strategic preferences of his followers consistently across time and contexts.

Tracing the origins of his directive and interest in the navy, Kadir Sağdıç and Güvenç highlight that Atatürk's friend-in-arms, Captain Rauf Orbay, influenced his vision for maritime development

in the early years (Sağdıç int 2021; Güvenç int 2022). Orbay was a veteran naval officer of the Balkan Wars in 1912-13 and made fame as *Hamidiye Kahramanı* (Hero of Hamidiye) when he distinguished himself in combat as a cruiser captain against the Greek navy. Orbay admired Britain's naval power and central position in world politics. His key influence on Turkey's maritime culture is that he is regarded as one of the naval heroes who gave a glimpse of hope to the country during the darkest days of the Balkan Wars when the entire northern Aegean came under Greece's control in 1913 (Gülen 1988; Sağdıç int 2021). Orbay spoke fluent English and visited major shipyards in Europe and the US before the war, gathering crucial know-how on naval shipbuilding. Accompanying him on the trip was Ransford D. Bucknam, an American admiral who served as a consultant for the Ottoman Navy during Sultan Abdülhamid II's reign (Aygün 2017, 10).²⁶ Together, they visited the White House and met US President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904. Roosevelt permitted Orbay to inspect US naval shipyards for building submarines and assigned a young lieutenant, Chester W. Nimitz,²⁷ to accompany him on tour (Yaylalı 2017).

Orbay's high-level contacts abroad during Abdülhamid II's era in the Ottoman Empire deserve attention since, ironically, the sultan was suspicious of the navy's coup plots to overthrow him. He kept the navy under check at Haliç harbor in Istanbul and wasted naval know-how for the sake of appeasing Britain against Russia, which resulted in the disastrous loss of the Aegean to Greece in the Balkan Wars.²⁸ Abdülhamid II allegedly courted Orbay to keep the navy under control and inform him of naval developments overseas.²⁹ Despite political intrigues at the palace in Istanbul,

²⁶ Bucknam received an honorary title from Abdülhamid II and became an Ottoman admiral, known as *Bağnam Paşa*.

²⁷ Commander in Chief of the US Pacific Fleet during World War II, later to become the Chief of Naval Operations.

²⁸ Interviews with Gürdeniz and Sağdıç in 2021. Ironically, Blue Homeland's forebearers like Gürdeniz and Sağdıç blame Abdülhamid II for his apparent neglect of the navy while the AKP's supporters praise him for his skillful, subtle balance of power diplomacy and yearn him on popular media. Kemalists compare Abdülhamid II's oppressive regime (*istibdat*) and suspicion of the navy in 1876-1908 to Erdoğan's illiberal practices and tacit approval of *Balyoz* / Admirals' Letter trials based on forged coup plots and purges of naval officers in 2008-2014, 2020-2021. Dr. Ersin Kalaycıoğlu labels the AKP era as "neo-Abdülhamidianism" (Kalaycıoğlu 2022).

²⁹ Informal conversations with formal Turkish naval officers (anonymized).

Orbay returned there after his trip to the US, served as the Minister of the Navy for the last Ottoman cabinet in 1918, and joined the national leadership in Ankara in 1921 for the War of Independence. Orbay shared his vast experience with Atatürk during the war and emphasized the necessity of naval power to avoid similar disasters like World War I in the future (Aygün 2017; Güvenç int 2022; Sağdıç int 2021). He held the title of the prime minister for a short period between 1923 and 1925, but Atatürk and Orbay parted their ways in 1925 due to the latter's "anti-republican remarks" in domestic politics (Aygün 2017; Güvenç 2002). Orbay left the country for a while, then re-entered public service, where he stayed for almost another decade and served as the Turkish Ambassador to London during the height of World War II from 1942 to 1944. In the US, President Roosevelt had Mahan, and in Germany, Wilhelm II had Tirpitz as naval advisors. Atatürk's advisor was Orbay for a short time. Together, they are regarded as founders of the modern Turkish navy. Sağdıç and Güvenç highlight that if Orbay had stayed in government service and oversaw the navy's development for longer, "a policy like Blue Homeland could have come out much earlier than 2000s" (Sağdıç int 2021; Güvenç int 2022). Even today, due to his achievements during the Balkan Wars, "Orbay's legendary influence on the navy is so strong" (Güvenç int 2022) that Sağdıç draws a parallel between his imprisonment at Silivri during *Balyoz* political trials in 2011-13 and Orbay's exile after the World War I in Malta in 1919-1921 (Sağdıç int 2021).

Besides Orbay's companionship in the early 1920s, another key influencer behind Atatürk's sensitivity to the navy was his earlier experience as an Ottoman army officer during the Tripoli-Libya War and Balkan Wars in 1911-1913. The massive loss of the Aegean Islands and his hometown Thessaloniki in just a few months to Greece, inflicted tremendous pain and left a trauma that shaped cognitive priors in Atatürk's mind and, thus, in Turkish cultural memory. This decisive war "established Turkish nationalism as never before," spurring a sense of "national identity,

particularly among the Young Turk movement,” including Atatürk himself (Heraclides 2008, 180). The Ottoman Empire consisted of Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Aegean Islands; Apakan says, “For us, World War I started in 1912-13, and we lost part of our homeland then” (Apakan int 2021). Islands fell almost without any serious resistance, in large part due to the overwhelming firepower and offensive maneuvers of the Greek battle cruiser *Averoff*.³⁰ The pain was so great that in 1915, when the British-French allied armada arrived unimpeded at Gallipoli, Atatürk told a German journalist, Ernst Jaeck, “We cannot sail on oceans, we are trapped on land. As a territorial power without a naval force, we can never defend our peninsula against a navy that can bring landing forces without hesitation” (Kadan 2021). “After World War I, Atatürk realized that you cannot win a war without control of the seas,” says Güvenç (2022), meaning that overwhelming sea-denial and power projection capabilities of an adversary could leave the defending army in a vulnerable position. “Therefore,” Güvenç adds, “during the interwar period, he wanted Turkey to prepare for naval defense and, if necessary, side with a maritime power to meet the threat of war.”

Based on his first-hand experience of the Ottoman Empire’s collapse, “after a decade of wars, quite naturally Atatürk’s number-one concern for the new republic was security” (Apakan int 2021). Essentially, Kemalism put “survival of the state (*beka*)” (Güvenç int 2022) as the central paradigm for policy-making and tried to achieve this through threat-minimization (security) instead of power-maximization (hegemony). However, Atatürk’s vision for maritime development was constrained by the desperate economic situation, lack of an industrial base/middle class, and domestic-political factors in the 1920s-30s, such as internal divisions about the republic’s

³⁰ The Greek Commander in Chief in 1996 during the Kardak/Imia crisis, Admiral Christos Lymperis, mentioned in his memoirs that the “Greek Navy acted as a force-multiplier during the Balkan Wars. Turkish Army was much larger in size than ours, but our navy immobilized and outmaneuvered them; they could not transfer their forces to the war front”. Lymperis, Christos. Kadir Sağdıç also mentioned this anecdote in an interview in September 2021.

governance structure (Aygün 2017). Capabilities were so limited that, despite having defeated Greece in 1922, Turkey had to drop its claim to many close islands/islets such as Kastellorizo (*Meis*) – which figure prominently in recent debates around maritime delimitation between Turkey and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean – at the negotiation table in Lausanne. Apakan adds, “...within his ability, Atatürk tried to maximize security for Anatolia; Eastern Aegean Islands had a Greek majority population and were already under Greek army’s occupation by 1923. Turkey did not have the capability to press its claims and demand their return in Lausanne” (Apakan int 2021).

Taking Apakan’s statement into perspective and linking it to contemporary times, it can be argued that geography is both an enabler and an inhibitor for Turkey. The country is on an important trade corridor, strategically positioned between three continents, but surrounded by Greek islands and Cyprus on its western and southern shores, respectively. For much of the republican era, Turkey perceived the proximity of militarized Greek islands and Cyprus as an obstacle to its crucial maritime interests and as threats that harbor offensive capabilities to strike deep into the Turkish mainland. In contemporary times, policymakers, including Erdoğan, have invoked the precedent of war-time politics of the 1920s to guide choices in Turkish strategic thinking.³¹ Referring to the militarization of Greek islands in the Aegean against international treaty obligations, retired admiral Cihat Yaycı also claimed that “had the coup attempt on July 15th, 2016 succeeded, Turkey would have fallen into a civil war, and Greece would have invaded our western coast to take control of the situation there [and to stem the inflow of refugees]; we have evidence of their plans/preparations for this” (Yaycı 2021). He makes a serious allegation, which

³¹ For Erdoğan’s statement, see: “We will not consent to an attempt to imprison us on our shores over the islands”. Anatolia News Agency (AA), August 11, 2020, available from: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-adalar-uzerinden-bizi-sahillerimize-hapsetme-girisimine-riza-gostermeyecegiz/1938123>.

reinforces anxieties about encirclement in Turkey and recalls cultural memory to allegorize an impending foreign invasion at the country's doorstep. Similarly, Greece also legitimizes its recent policy toward Turkey by evoking references to neo-Ottomanism or "expansionism of Turks on doors of Europe" (G. Şahin and Yılmaz 2021, 70), templates that are much more familiar and readily available than the seemingly gargantuan task of re-defining the "other" in benign terms.

This "otherization" is an important factor in strategic culture because the theme of Greek-Turkish rivalry recurs throughout the republican era and forms a cornerstone of the securitized maritime policy of Blue Homeland today. To be sure, the Greek-Turkish bilateral relationship is fraught with a painful historical background that oversees conflicting narratives of nationalism in public discourse. Both countries are considered to be "founding others" of one another (Ünlühisarcıklı 2020), in reference to their respective roles as occupiers prior to gaining independence – Greece in 1829 and Turkey in 1923. They define their self-conception as nation-states in terms of the other by invoking memories of adversity cultivated during wars of independence. Herkül Milas argues that "this is probably the only case in history where two nation-states were created after two successive fights against each other," as cited in Gizem Alioğlu Çakmak's article about Greek-Turkish relations (Alioğlu Çakmak 2019, 289). Historical expansion to the detriment of the "other" is a key aspect of the impasse in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean today because, as Antonis Klapsis and Kostas Ifantis concur, "There is [almost two centuries of] distrust between the two countries" (Klapsis int 2021; Ifantis int 2021). Due to fresh losses in collective memory, further loss of territory/sea is unacceptable to both sides. Deeply historical sources such as those Yaycı refers to above provide information to policymakers to "reduce uncertainty about the current strategic environment" (Johnston 1995, 46) for tackling modern-day maritime conflicts.

Based on the historical precedent of Greek-Turkish relations and Atatürk’s maritime policy, particularly his interest in the navy, Gürdeniz says that “Turkey’s maritime strategy adheres to the Corbett school of thought [about primacy of politics and naval warfare as a tool of diplomacy]; Mahan’s theory [of hegemonic sea control] is out of fashion” (Gürdeniz int 2021b).³² This means the utility of the navy is not purely in offensive, hegemonic control of seas for the support of capitalist gains but in an on-demand arm of national power to limit the war in service of political goals. Such goals might extend across multiple theaters, including high seas (Gürdeniz int 2021b; Milevski 2016; Şafak Polat 2022).³³ Gürdeniz’s further claim that “the foundation of Blue Homeland is in Kemalism” shows that he heralds Atatürk’s cautious but pragmatic foreign policy as a blueprint for the republic’s survival. It also validates Gingeras’s and Tol’s arguments that Atatürk’s early republican directives and the Kemalist ideology have an “enduring power on Turkish politics” (Gingeras 2020; Medyascope Plus 2020). Evidence presented in the following sections shows that Atatürk’s idea of forward-defense and vision for maritime development in his 1924 anecdote influenced action-oriented perceptions of naval officers like Gürdeniz, Sağdıç, and Kutluk and became the backbone of an assertive strategic culture after the 1960s with the emergence of the Cyprus Problem. Its persistent goal would be to implement a security periphery around national borders and prevent encirclement by rival countries in the maritime domain.

1.2. The Montreux Convention in 1936 and Atatürk’s Multilateral Diplomacy

Atatürk’s foreign policy in his final years toward the end of the 1930s deserves due attention to further explore Kemalist strategic culture’s foundations and influence on Turkey’s maritime

³² Many interview respondents such as Güvenç, Sağdıç, and Yaylalı think that Atatürk might have read Corbett’s book, titled “Some Principles of Maritime Strategy,” published in 1918.

³³ Güvenç argues that “Mahan’s influence on the navy is profound. The late professor Mert Bayat in the Turkish Naval Academy influenced many naval cadres and he followed the Mahan doctrine” (Güvenç int 2022). That was the case during the Cold War paradigm for sea denial/domination in the Black Sea, but “the Corbettian approach is more suitable for contemporary challenges in the Aegean and the East Med” (TN-1 int 2021). Geopolitics dictates a more prudent strategy than hegemonic control of the sea.

policy. Gürdeniz and Sağdıç highlight that the Montreux Convention (1936) is a foundational stone that, together with the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), forms the “title deed” of the republic.³⁴ Apakan lends support to the admirals and says, “Often neglected, it is important to understand the equilibrium set by the *Misâk-ı Millî* [National Pact], Lausanne Treaty, and Montreux Convention for Turkey” (Apakan int 2021). In essence, this triage positioned Turkey as a non-belligerent balancer between the Middle East, West (Europe), and Russia, prioritizing survivability of the state (*beka*) over adventurous foreign expeditions. However, the main issue was that provisions of Lausanne had placed the Turkish Straits under the tutelage of an international commission while Gallipoli and Istanbul had demilitarized status. In the turbulent interwar period after the Great Depression in 1929, this was a sore point in the Turkish national psyche. The state’s sovereignty could not extend into these enclaves, much less have any say over passage rights for ships. Güvenç underlines that due to great power rivalry and European revisionism in the 1930s, “Turkish naval strategy emphasized missions to keep sea lines of communication open rather than territorial defense in case of war” (Güvenç int 2022). Therefore, gaining control over the Straits was a crucial issue in the lead-up to World War II for the balance of power in Europe. As the most prominent naval power in Europe, Britain built closer relations with Turkey when the British King Edward VIII invited the Turkish fleet to Malta in 1936 and met Atatürk’s desire to conduct naval diplomacy overseas (Belenli 2019).³⁵ Before the visit, Atatürk found an opportunity to remedy the situation in the Turkish Straits, re-instate state authority over these crucial waterways, and maintain the country’s pivotal status among rival powers. At an international conference in July 1936, Turkey and nine other states, including Britain, France, Greece, and the USSR, signed an agreement to regulate the regime of the straits in peace and war times.

³⁴ Interviews with Gürdeniz and Sağdıç in September 2021.

³⁵ *Yavuz* battle cruiser joined this visit as the flagship of the navy.

A fine point often missed in discussions of 1936 is that, interestingly, after the Montreux Convention, Atatürk turned a blind eye to Greece's territorial water expansion in the Aegean Sea from 3 miles to 6 miles. This was in part due to his friendship with the then-Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos, who had nominated Atatürk for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1934.³⁶ Sağdıç says that Atatürk gave "higher priority to Montreux Convention in the pre-war atmosphere and co-opted Greece as a friendly country and a signatory at that time" (Sağdıç int 2021). A senior Turkish diplomat agrees that "you need to couch it on its own temporal context, it would bear false results to make a retrospective analysis using the political, legal, and social standards/yardsticks of today" (SDS-1 int 2021). Athens celebrated the agreement such that, in contrast to years of enmity between the two countries, at the signing ceremony of the Montreux Convention, the Greek delegate Nicolaos Politis said, "Turkey emerges from this conference as the country with moral high-ground and supporter of international peace and cooperation" (Miraç 2021).

Not everyone believes that Turkey co-opted Greece solely for peacebuilding and legitimating the Montreux Convention. Terms such as continental shelves, exclusive economic zones, and offshore energy resources were non-existent at the time; technology permitted limited maneuvers, and the navy was small. "Otherwise," Gürdeniz claims, "Atatürk would duly defend our maritime interests against Greece and not let it alter the status quo in the Aegean by increasing its territorial waters to 6 miles" (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Still, the admirals herald the Montreux Convention as a landmark diplomatic achievement for maritime control that would help Turkey navigate a delicate balance during World War II and the Cold War and "prevent the Black Sea from becoming another Persian Gulf."³⁷ "It serves a purpose for Turkey to diffuse pressure from either direction, the West and Russia, by saying 'look, there's a treaty, we have to abide,'" says interviewee and analyst

³⁶ Perhaps because of their friendship, Atatürk also ordered the conversion of Hagia Sophia to a museum in 1935.

³⁷ An informal conversation with Gürdeniz in 2021.

Nicholas Danforth (Danforth int 2021). This is important for Blue Homeland since the convention partially alleviated Ankara's threat perception of an overbearing USSR from the north during the Cold War and enabled a shift in the Turkish navy's engagement toward the more conflictual theaters of the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas from the 1960s onwards (Gürdeniz 2021d; Elikoğlu 2020, 131).

Aside from the Montreux Convention, under Atatürk's initiative, a collegial atmosphere developed in the 1930s, and Turkey joined Greece, Romania, and Yugoslavia to enact The Balkan Pact/Entente (1934) to help maintain the status quo in the peninsula against Italian-Bulgarian revisionism. Moreover, the Saidabad Pact between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan in 1937 aimed to form a bulwark against Italian designs in the Middle East. These developments highlight that, altogether, Atatürk based his foreign policy on a careful assessment of the balance of power politics and favored cautious activism rather than the two extreme ends of isolationism and adventurism. "The three mainstays of his policy were to stay away from interference with the Arab world, refrain from provocative engagements against Russia, and to maintain balanced relations with the West," says Gürdeniz (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Finally, on the eve of World War II, after years of Atatürk's personal effort utilizing divisions among Europeans and courting France's support against Germany, Hatay (Antioch) province joined Turkey following a plebiscite in 1939.³⁸ This occasion marked another diplomatic achievement for Ankara, which gained a strategic land extension into the Eastern Mediterranean on the north-south axis (Gürdeniz int 2021b). The Montreux Convention, the annexation of Hatay, and the pre-war alliance diplomacy are evidence of Atatürk's legitimation strategy for securing Turkey's periphery by emphasizing

³⁸ France decided to grant independence to Syria in 1930s and Ankara asked to re-negotiate the treaty of 1921 defining the Turkish-French Mandate border. Through France's approval, majority of the autonomous region of Hatay voted in a plebiscite to join Turkey.

neutrality (Montreux), collective defense (Balkan/Saidabad Pacts), and self-determination (Hatay).

In conclusion, foundational principles of Turkish foreign policy and maritime strategy are based on “*realpolitik* essentials” that stemmed from “concrete interests during both Atatürk’s era of multipolarity and bipolarity afterwards” (Ünal int 2021). These principles are a product of the strategic culture that reflects Atatürk’s worldview, historical memory, and strategic preferences as a former army officer and a statesman. Although cautious in foreign policy, this republican strategic paradigm “was always ready to use military might as a means of deterrence and as an intimate accessory to diplomacy when the perseverance (*beka*) of the state was at stake” (Areteos 2021, 7). From a realist perspective, Atatürk’s aphorism “*Yurtta Sulh, Cihanda Sulh*” (peace at home, peace in the world), which became the republic’s motto,³⁹ refers not to democratic peace theory or liberal international harmony, but Turkey’s security and institution of a collaborative, proactive peacekeeping atmosphere with regional partners. It is a manifestation of hard-earned independence and dignity of the new Turkish republic. This was Atatürk’s invention “to give way to stability after years of traumatic chaos” and his prescription to Turkey’s leaders to “know their limits” (Mufti 2009, 18). To further explore the presence of a strategic culture in Turkey, the next section traces how the foreign policy establishment responded to structural factors and systemic stimuli during the Cold War and how domestic factors moderated such policies.

2. Turkey’s Maritime Policy During the Cold War

After Atatürk’s death in 1938, Turkey entered a relatively calm period in maritime development and effectively stayed neutral throughout most of World War II. The Turkish position

³⁹ There is skepticism among scholars toward taking this motto as granted. Gingeras says, “people naturally assume that there was a foreign policy consensus and that centered on Kemalist aphorisms like ‘Peace at Home, Peace in the World’, and multilateralism and so on, but we do not really have a deep understanding of how Turkish foreign policy establishment works” (Gingeras int 2021).

of “active neutrality” to fend off pressure from both the Axis and Allied powers to enter the war was a “practical necessity” due to the country’s political and military weakness (Deringil 1989). There was even a period of “realistic but passive policy” until the 1960s (Ülgen int 2021), keeping Turkey out of the war in spite of numerous opportunities for territorial expansion (Papuççular 2020; Hayta 2015, 171) and focusing on internal economic hardships as a priority. Interestingly, Turkey warmed up to the USSR for a period in the 1920s and 30s,⁴⁰ but after perceiving Molotov-Stalin’s alleged designs on the Turkish Straits and claims on land territory in northeastern Anatolia in 1945, Ankara approached the US/NATO alliance. Despite being rejected in 1950, after participating in the Korean War, Turkey became a full member of the alliance together with Greece in 1952. Meanwhile, in a cyclical manner, the nature of US-Turkey relations from the 1920s onwards “also had their ups and downs” (Outzen int 2021), but threat perception from the USSR was an important factor in Ankara’s foreign policy calculus after 1945. During the early years of the Cold War, there was a restrictive strategic environment along with more clarity and imminence of threats to Turkey due to the geographic proximity of its conspicuous adversaries in the Warsaw Pact. Turkish Straits gated the only warm-water entrance for the USSR to reach the Atlantic Ocean, and Russians repeatedly demanded “joint control of the Straits” in 1945-1946, which, according to the Truman administration, “reflected a desire to control and dominate Turkey” (Knight 1975, 451). If allowed, it would be “difficult, if not impossible, to stop Russia from controlling Greece, Turkey, and ‘the whole Near and the Middle East’” (Knight 1975, 451). Ankara balanced Stalin’s alleged designs through rapprochement with the US, while NATO defense plans designated Turkey as primarily a land force to resist an invasion from the north. The US deployed bombers to the Adana-İncirlik airbase in southeastern Turkey and placed nuclear strike capabilities for crisis

⁴⁰ For instance, the USSR granted 4 T-26, 1 T-27, and 1 T-35 tanks to Turkey on the tenth anniversary of the republic.

management in case of an escalation. Crucially, the NATO defense doctrine delimited Turkey's maritime coverage to only the Black Sea. Instead, it appointed Greece to cover the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, mainly because the Greek islands could act as a secondary defense ring and block Soviet access to the Mediterranean if Turkey fell to the USSR.

During the Cold War, the Turkish army depended almost entirely on the US to maintain and upgrade its equipment to modern standards. Since the USSR was a common threat, Turkey's military doctrine was centered on the NATO alliance's security framework. Richard Outzen, who is a former US official and former senior advisor to Ambassador (Ret.) James F. Jeffrey during the Trump administration,⁴¹ points to Turkish-US military ties as a major enabling factor in the alliance: "To me, one of the major stabilizers in the US-Turkey relationship during the Cold War were defense ties and defense-industrial ties, such as the assembly of F-16 fighter jets in Turkey, and military-to-military ties: thousands of American troops and their families visited there and had a sympathetic view of Turkey" (Outzen int 2021). Ankara was a loyal NATO ally with marginal involvement in maritime upgrades during the early years of the Cold War due to a lack of capabilities and the primacy of Turkey as a land force. Mevlütoğlu summarizes this situation succinctly: "The navy had two major missions up till the 90s. The first was within NATO to defend the Black Sea and Turkish Straits against a Soviet/Warsaw Pact incursion into the south. The second was against Greece, to defend our maritime interests in the arc from Northern Aegean to Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean. Even then, the navy's horizon was limited; its area of interest did not go beyond the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece" (Mevlütoğlu int 2021). Ironically, the position against Greece, not the Soviets, became the main driver of Turkey's maritime activism after the 1960s. This aspect is further discussed in the next section.

⁴¹ Ambassador Jeffrey was the US Special Representative for Syria Engagement during the Trump administration.

Some Turkish critics of the enhanced US-Turkey partnership during that era point out that “after 1947, Turkey reduced itself into a figurant of the Truman Doctrine to encircle the USSR in the Eurasian rimland and downgraded its own national geopolitical interests against the West’s hegemonic ambitions” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Retrospectively, navy commanders who adhere to Kemalist strategic tradition of maritime control call this calm era a “sleeping period” before the “awakening call” in the 1960s when the Cyprus Problem erupted (Gürdeniz 2020a, 43–44).⁴² The relatively stable period within NATO until the late 1950s ended when crises erupted over Cyprus between Turkey and Greece, followed by the island’s division after a brief Greek coup and Turkish military intervention in 1974, and subsequent maritime crisis in the last fifty years. For Cyprus, Greece’s strategy was to annex the island with its Greek Cypriot majority population. At the same time, Turkey aimed to partition it along the north-south axis to guarantee the security of Turkish Cypriots. Although Turkey was dependent on US military aid and lacked naval capabilities to land in Cyprus, it resolutely demanded that Turkish Cypriots’ concerns for peace and security be duly considered. By the mid-1960s, the island became the proverbial “unsinkable aircraft carrier” in the Eastern Mediterranean among two competing NATO allies.⁴³ Raising the stakes for military control over Cyprus, the island turned into an intelligence base for Britain and the US to watch Soviet nuclear activity and a potential target for the USSR in case Turkey attempted to formally occupy the island (O’Malley and Craig 1999, 147–49).

⁴² Republic of Cyprus (RoC) is a *sui generis* country established in 1960 under the guarantee of Britain, Greece, and Turkey. In 1963, president of the republic Archbishop Makarios suggested constitutional changes to isolate Turks from the government. Inter-communal clashes erupted between Greek and Turkish people on the island that damaged the spirit of co-inhabitation and ultimately led to the collapse of the Cypriot government. After eleven years of low-scale armed conflict, an attempted coup in 1974 by the Greek Cypriot right-wing terrorist organization EOKA-B to unite Cyprus with Greece prompted Turkey’s military intervention under the “Treaty of Guarantee” to restore the constitutional order. The island is split into two parts in 36%/60% ratio between Turks in the north and Greeks in the south (3% for British sovereign bases and 1% for the UN buffer zone). The Greek Cypriot “Republic of Cyprus” has since then gained international recognition as the legitimate representative government of Cyprus, whereas the *de facto* “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” which declared its independence in 1983, is only recognized by Turkey.

⁴³ US Gen. Douglas MacArthur originally used that phrase to designate Taiwan’s role in the Western Pacific (Green 2005).

2.1. Turkish Foreign Policy toward Cyprus and Greece in the 1960s

To understand the Turkish strategy in Cyprus, Atatürk's earlier directives provide useful guidance. In a meeting with army officers in 1937, he allegedly put his finger on the map, pointed to the island, and said, "As long as Cyprus is in enemy hands, our supply routes in the region are blocked. Pay attention to Cyprus. This island is important to us" (Göksan 2019).⁴⁴ His legacy would have a lasting impact on Turkish planners, so much so that this quote is a mantra for the defense establishment even today. The 1960s were a cornerstone from Ankara's perspective because in the following years, for various reasons, Turkey came to the brink of armed conflict with Greece at least once every decade up until the early 2000s. Starting with Cyprus, common to all these crises were disputes centered on sovereignty over islands/islets and maritime domains; notably, "There is continuity in Turkey's policies vis-à-vis Greece" (Ünal int 2021). According to Ülgen, "Turkey had always had, even before the AKP, an interpretation of its own rights in the Aegean and the Mediterranean that was at odds with Greece," as cited in Evangelos Areteos's article titled "*Mavi Vatan* and Forward Defense" (Areteos 2021, 6). "The Turkish perspective toward Greece has a maritime component and this has historical roots," adds Çağaptay, "The perception in Ankara has been that Greece tries to corner and box Turkey in" (Çağaptay 2021). Essentially, there is a perennial security impasse in this relationship: the geographic location of the Greek islands [and Cyprus] makes Turkey vulnerable to encirclement, and Turkey's size/power makes the former two insecure. Politically, the "dual minority" problem in Cyprus, in which Turkish Cypriots feel overwhelmed by Greeks who are anxious about Turkey's military presence,

⁴⁴ Güvenç argues that Atatürk never uttered this phrase, that "he vaguely mentioned his sympathies for Turkish Cypriots to attract their talent to an under-populated Turkey, but didn't go so far to attribute strategic importance to the island" (Güvenç int 2022). Atatürk expressed similar sympathies for Turks from Crete, but Cyprus is a different case since it was a British colony rather than a part of Greece. For the present discussion, it is less important what he said than what inspiration people derived from it. It is an imagination of what Atatürk would have done had he been alive today. Ünal says, "If he had lived long, Atatürk would want to partition Cyprus and annex the Turkish part" (Ünal int 2021).

has made it a notoriously difficult conflict to resolve. As such, Turkey and Greece are “the only two countries in NATO that have had disputes on the same parameters [maritime zones, air space, and islands] since they joined the alliance in 1952” (İpek int 2021). These disputes over territorial rights evolved and expanded following technological advancements and military capabilities over the last six decades. A senior Turkish diplomatic source says that “there is a persistent culture in Turkey since early republican years, but its scope has widened. Scope is dependent on our material capabilities; the extension of our interest in our maritime zones is conditioned upon development of our capabilities” (SDS-1 int 2021). This is a clear manifestation of Turkey’s confidence based on its rising relative power and perception of it as an enabler of maritime activism.

Regarding Turkey’s anxiety about Cyprus and quest for maritime access, past crises suggest that Greece and the RoC were always one step ahead of Turkey to “walk the walk” when it came to taking ownership of and expanding claims over islands/islets, maritime zones, and resources therein. This is partly because Greeks have a strong maritime legacy; they cultivate maritime consciousness among people, place particular emphasis on their merchant navy fleet as a propellant of their economic well-being and embrace the sea as an enabler of national security. Turkey, by comparison, is a traditional land power. It has a strong military culture that bears signs of securitization in foreign policy but not any verifiable pre-disposition to become a maritime nation with overseas interests like Britain or France. Indeed, originally, “Turkey did not devote sufficient attention to [make its rights and interest with regards to] Aegean/Eastern Mediterranean issues [known],” adds Ülgen (Ülgen int 2021). Turkey showed interest in Cyprus only when Britain decided to depart from there after the Suez Crisis in 1956, and the Greek Cypriot President Makarios provoked the situation with his demand for *Enosis*.⁴⁵ Ankara initially kept a low profile

⁴⁵ *Enosis*: In this context, union of Cyprus with Greece.

on Cyprus, such that the former foreign minister Fuat Köprülü said in 1953 that “Turkey does not have a Cyprus Issue as long as Britain stays on the island” (Sevindi 2017). Later, as conditions changed, Ankara clearly articulated its interests on the island, gradually built power-projection capabilities in the navy, and utilized gunboat diplomacy as a critical instrument of coercion in Cyprus to achieve its desired objectives. Nevertheless, it was only when the situation came to a boiling point in 1973-1974 that Turkey reacted forcefully against Greek claims in the Aegean and Cyprus, revealing a persistent *realpolitik* culture when it faces a risk of loss of territorial integrity, sovereignty, or access to high seas. This development illustrates that Kemalist strategic culture’s central paradigm of the survival of the state (*beka*) has policy consequences in the face of a changing threat environment that expanded to include Greece, Cyprus, and the USSR. For Ülgen, a difference between those early years and after 2016 is that Turkey recently adopted a more proactive policy toward the maritime domain, and the “*Mavi Vatan* narrative extrapolated an understanding of national sovereignty onto maritime rights” (Areteos 2021, 6). Causal factors behind this shift to a proactive policy in recent years are explored in the next chapter.

Despite frictions with Greece over sovereign rights during the Cold War, Turkey remained a member of the NATO alliance and accepted its more general threat perception of the USSR as a common denominator throughout the 1970s and the 80s. Aside from ideological divides, and despite its ups and downs, interviewed experts such as Ünal and Outzen highlight that the bipolar world of the Cold War era was indeed more stable than the unipolar world of the 90s and 2000s from Turkey’s perspective. During the “bounded order” years of the Cold War (Mearsheimer 2019, 8), Europe was divided into two clear camps (orders), and superpowers imposed a discipline on more junior partners. They set policy priorities and mediated frictions at the subordinate levels within those blocs, as in Turkey and Greece or over Cyprus, and “they were able to get results”

(Outzen int 2021). Washington's position on Turkish-Greek rivalry was "something that they wanted to go away so that everyone could focus on what America's interest was, which was the USSR. The US did not care if it was Greece or Turkey who started the problem, they just wanted all sides to calm down" (Danforth int 2021). One such case where Washington intervened was in 1964, when a crisis erupted over the governance structure of Cyprus. On that year, Greek Cypriots isolated the Turks from the government and Greece landed its army on the island to take control of the situation. The UNSC Resolution #1860 recognized the Greek Cypriot administration as the *de facto* official government of Cyprus, which "remains as the fundamental stumbling block toward a solution to the political dispute" (UN Peacemaker 1964; SDS-2 int 2021). The earliest tell-tale signs of Turkey's coercive policy in the Eastern Mediterranean appeared in this context as Ankara presented an ultimatum to Athens in 1964 to withdraw its invasion force from the bi-communal RoC. In return, Greece began to militarize Eastern Aegean and Dodecanese islands close to Turkey's western coast in violation of international agreements.⁴⁶ As the Greek-Turkish relationship sank to new lows, Turkey reciprocated Greece's 1936 move, increasing the breadth of its territorial waters from 3 miles to 6 miles in 1964. The reaction to Ankara's ultimatum in Washington, however, was swift and intense. US President Lyndon B. Johnson's letter in response to Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü⁴⁷ to diffuse tensions on the island "tested the boundaries of the [US-Turkey] bilateral relationship" (Mevlütöğlü int 2021) and created a wedge in the US-

⁴⁶ Greece's refers to "a perceived threat of invasion by Turkey" since 1974 to justify militarization of Aegean islands. Kerem Gülay, Professor of Law at Koç University in Istanbul, challenges this view: "Turkey's presence in Cyprus, whether it be as an intervening guarantor or invader, has no implications for Aegean Islands; Greece may not legally invoke the case of Turkey's presence on Cyprus to make an argument about the illegally militarized status of its islands under the UN article 51 for self-defense. These two are governed under different international treaties. Cyprus is not Greece, and the latter may not legitimize its violations by referencing a completely irrelevant case in the former" (Gülay int 2021).

⁴⁷ Johnson's letter was a stark warning to İnönü that, first, Turkey may not use arms provided by the US on Cyprus, and second, the US would not be obliged to invoke Article 5 of the NATO Treaty to protect Turkey if the Turkish government carried on with its threat to intervene in Cyprus, and the USSR launched a counterstrike. When the letter was disclosed a couple of years later, it fell like a bombshell on Turkish media and caused a huge public outcry. This came on top of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, further straining the US-Turkey bilateral relationship.

Turkey military alliance, the scars of which remain today. Arda Mevlütoğlu says, “The psychological impact of the letter signaled that, one, Turkey’s national interests and priorities did not always align with those of its closest allies, and two, Turkey needed to develop an indigenous military-industry complex to pursue its interests” (Mevlütoğlu int 2021).

This realization “triggered the rise of national awareness” (Mevlütoğlu int 2021), both in the government and among the public for self-sufficiency, at least in some key areas of the arms industry. It also echoed the manifesto of *Millî Görüş* (National Vision) religious movement in Turkish domestic politics of the late 1960s. This vision with anti-Western origins inspired by the former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan influenced many political leaders and right-wing parties, including *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party) in the 1980s, *Fazilet Partisi* (Virtue Party) in the 1990s, and the AKP with Ahmet Davutoğlu-Abdullah Gül-Tayyip Erdoğan in 2000s. These pragmatic leaders campaigned for an Islamic development model based on protecting religious traditions, moral values, and independence from the West. The motto of this vision was *Adil Düzen* (Fair Order) which proposed an Islamic-style free-market economy, referred to Islamic proscriptions on usury, demanded fair returns to labor capital, and emphasized heavy industrial development for import-substitution. Apart from such ideological and political-economic reasons, there was anxiety in the 1960s that “what Anglo-Greek coalition did in 1919 by invading Anatolia can repeat at seas” by occupying the Eastern Mediterranean (Kutluk int 2021), prompting Turkey to invest in its navy. Retired admiral Atilla Kıyat adds that “the origins of Blue Homeland go back at least half a century... Back in 1970s, we drew attention to the necessity to be more proactive when it comes to Turkey’s maritime interests and to establish a Ministry of Maritime Affairs” (Kıyat int 2021; Ünal int 2021). Such thoughts prompted Turkish defense planners to deviate toward strategic autonomy against NATO’s clear mandates to focus exclusively on the Black Sea.

Upon Turkey's ultimatum, Greece eventually withdrew from Cyprus later in 1964. However, the long-term outcome of the crisis was that Turkey embarked on devising a national naval strategy and building its landing crafts over the next decade for an amphibious assault on Cyprus in 1974. Therefore, Mevlütoğlu highlights that "there is a two-way causal link between the development of an indigenous military-industry complex and Turkey's activist foreign policy in maritime domains; they feed into each other" (Mevlütoğlu int 2021). Similar to "Israel's incentive to develop its own systems after the French arms embargo in 1973 as a result of the pressure from Arab-Gulf states via leverage of the oil weapon" (Outzen and Kasapoğlu 2021), Turkey initiated its own indigenous defense industry in the late 1960s. "Turkey's response to Johnson's letter in 1964 and the US arms embargo after the Cyprus Operation in 1974 are extensions of the same defensive realist approach," says Ünal (Ünal 2002). Under a restrictive strategic environment that presented high clarity of threats and immediacy to act, a nationalist coalition of political parties from the left and right (MSP-AP) acted upon a *realpolitik* strategic culture and received support from the army with a developing indigenous arms industry. The government put the idea into the collective Turkish national psyche that "if Turkey needs to act independently and protect its interests, it cannot rely on external arms procurement" (Mevlütoğlu int 2021).

Nonetheless, Turkey's 1960s military interventions in Cyprus were still surgical strikes in the context of crisis management, with a limited scope to manipulate the outcome and send a message to Greek Cypriots; "there was no grand strategic vision attached to it" (Tziarras int 2021). In 1974, the situation was different. On July 15, in the context of the Watergate scandal in Washington, the CIA manipulated the Greek junta in Athens to attempt a coup in Nicosia and annex the island (Hitchens 1999, 61–100), which met with Turkey's decisive intervention on July 20. The US was able to contain the crisis in 1964 but could not – or did not – prevent the escalation of an armed

conflict in 1974, even though then Turkey was a marginal ally with heavy dependence on US military aid. After President Johnson's 1964 letter, the second major crack in US-Turkey relations appeared when the US Congress imposed an arms embargo on Ankara in 1975. Turkey reciprocated by closing US military facilities in the country.

Figure 9: Greece's Averoff Cruiser Captured Aegean Islands, 1912-1913



Source: Kevin Myskiw, 2020

Figure 10: Turkish Forces Captured a Greek Gunboat in North Cyprus, 1974



Source: Örses Archive, 2020

In many interviewees' opinions, a major difference between the 1970s and CAATSA⁴⁸ sanctions on Turkey since 2020 is that bilateral military-to-military ties with the US remained intact in the former case, thanks to the Cold War and mutual threat perception against the USSR, whereas in the latter, it did not (Outzen int 2021; Ülgen int 2021). Evidence suggests that US military officials made repeated calls to President Gerald Ford's government in Washington that "a continued embargo against Turkey jeopardizes bases vital for NATO defense and for monitoring Soviet missile activity... The arms embargo is increasing tension between Turkey and Greece...The US has no interest in making a choice between Greece and Turkey" (AMVETS 1975).⁴⁹ These pledges paid off, and due to mutual dependency on NATO's security framework, the US lifted the arms embargo in 1978, and Turkey re-opened US military bases after 1980. It

⁴⁸ CAATSA: Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.

⁴⁹ These remarks are in stark contrast to US official statements in the post-2016 period as the next chapter shows.

showed that “Turkey often sought to craft a more autonomous and ambitious foreign policy, even during the Cold War, but its policy largely remained anchored within the Western framework” (Dalay and Keyman 2021).

Not everyone agrees that Turkey’s motive was mainly defensive in the 1974 crisis. Tziarras considers the invasion of 1974 as a “revisionist move”; “That is what it became eventually” (Tziarras int 2021). Although Tziarras acknowledges that “the Turkish establishment back then considered it to be a defensive move against *Enosis*,” the way things developed later with Turkey remaining on the island and violating the reason for which it came, which was the restoration of the constitutional order, ends up being a “revisionist policy” (Tziarras int 2021). Speaking of the Greek strategic culture, Ifantis says, “This is why [since 1974], you’ve got in the Greek mindset the establishment of the threat from the east” (Ifantis int 2021), and “Greeks have been socialized to regard Turks as aggressive” (Heraclides int 2021). Parallel to Dalay’s and Keyman’s earlier comments about Turkey’s anchor in the West, Tziarras admits that 1974 was about “Turkey managing its affairs and securing itself in relation to Greece and Cyprus within the framework of the Cold War constraints and the relationship with the US; but the Turkish government still cared about what the West was saying; unlike Turkish militarism of today [which is more independent]” (Tziarras int 2021). This perception of a belligerent Turkey is one of the reasons why Greece (and the EU) considers more recent activist policies like Blue Homeland as expanded, more aggressive versions of previous hostilities in the 1970s.

2.2. Extension of the “Vatan” Concept in the Context of the Cyprus Problem

In addition to geopolitical developments, it is crucial to provide an overview of the *Vatan* concept’s evolution since the 1960s to grasp the historical significance of the Cyprus Problem in Blue Homeland’s emergence. This section illustrates how *Vatan* supported Turkey’s political

legitimation strategy for its growing interests beyond its land borders. *Vatan* is of Arabic origin (وطن), meaning ‘native land.’ In Weberian terminology, it symbolizes the integrity of a community within the territorial boundaries of a nation-state that keeps a monopoly of violence, exercises political authority, and maintains order. *Vatan* appears in mainstream Turkish media as a powerful narrative to reinforce “embodied points of view” (Bishara 2013) that suit established social norms, state authority, and the idea of loyalty to serve the nation, especially during a crisis like that in Cyprus in 1974. In folk epistemology, *Vatan* is distinguished from a country by the notion of self-sacrifice in the service of national survival. However, the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933) says that “the state as a person of international law should possess a defined territory” (UN Treaties 1933). The keyword here is “defined” because although Turkey has a national homeland defined as per the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and subsequent international agreements, the term *Vatan* has been extended into other/undefined domains, territorial and non-territorial, from the 1960s onwards.

The first example of the extension was the phrase *Yavru Vatan* (Baby Homeland) for Cyprus. This term appeared at the end of the British colonial period after 1960 when the island nation gained independence. Civil unrest and subsequent breakdown of the Cypriot government arose national backlash in Turkey to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority, and people labelled Cyprus as *Yavru Vatan*. “This is about Turkey’s perception of Turkish Cypriots and their struggle for survival since the opposition camp is North Cyprus has a different view and refuses to use this phrase,” says Deniz Tansi, an interviewee and analyst with Turkish Cypriot origins (Tansi int 2021). Tansi points out that the “*Yavru Vatan* phrase is not a legal symbol that puts North Cyprus under Turkey’s sovereignty, it is rather a political symbol of *beka* (survivability) for both mainland and Turkish Cypriots by reference to the kinship between *Anavatan* (motherland) and fighters in

the *Türk Mukavemet Teşkilatı* (TMT) (Turkish Resistance Organization) in Cyprus. The concept of *Vatan* denotes honor and sanctity of protecting borders” (Tansi int 2021). From a different angle, under the *Vatan* concept, Turkish Cypriots are Turks living abroad, part of what is called the “outside Turks.” Hence, “By definition, Cyprus is part of *Vatan* as well” (Tziarras int 2021). *Yavru Vatan* is an important part of the political language used as a legitimation strategy for Turkey’s interventions in Cyprus since the 1960s. Deriving its significance from Kemalist culture’s central thought about the state’s survival, *Yavru Vatan* provided the first interface to Turkey’s extended interests in the maritime periphery.

The second case of *Vatan*’s extension was Azerbaijan in the 1990s, or *Kardeş Vatan* (Brother Homeland). Common ethnic roots and cultural bonds brought the two countries under the banner of “*iki devlet, tek millet*” (two states, one nation) when Armenia invaded Nagorno-Karabagh in 1993. To promote diplomatic recognition of North Cyprus in the Turkic world, this phrase evolved into “*üç devlet, tek millet*” (three states, one nation), especially after Turkey assisted Azerbaijan to reclaim Nagorno-Karabagh in 2020. *Mavi Vatan* follows this pattern of adding nouns or adjectives to the term *Vatan* and thereby “generating subtypes to extend the concept” into new domains (Collier and Levitsky 1997, 437). Gürdeniz candidly writes, “*Anavatan, Yavru Vatan, and Mavi Vatan* are part of the same whole, they cannot be separated” (Gürdeniz 2019a).

In defense of *Vatan*, all factions across the political spectrum were united in Turkey’s stance toward Cyprus even before the AKP governments. “It’s a red line in our foreign policy, above party politics,” says Aylin Ünver Noi, “It aims to protect legitimate rights of Turkish Cypriots, and Blue Homeland is a continuation of this historic policy” (Ünver Noi int 2021). Interviewed experts highlight that the emphasis on the *Vatan* concept at times of rising nationalist sentiment is an interesting phenomenon and that “there is a correlation between nationalist political rhetoric and

Turkey's relations with its allies" (İpek int 2021). İpek observes that "nationalist discourse falls back when Turkey has strong institutional bonds/dialogue with Western organizations like NATO, and it rises when Turkey acts more autonomously [as in 1974 over Cyprus]" (İpek int 2021). Therefore, evidence suggests that historically, the quest for strategic autonomy in Ankara has been a major factor in *Vatan's* use as a legitimization strategy at times of disagreement with the US/NATO since the 1970s. This usage constitutes a recurring pattern that would legitimize nationalist policies when Turkey's geopolitical interests began to clash with those of the EU/US from the 1980s onwards and intensified after the failed coup attempt in 2016.

2.3. International Law, Maritime Jurisdictions, and the UNCLOS Regime

To trace the origins of Blue Homeland further, this section explores the topic of maritime zones as an area of contestation around Cyprus and in the Aegean Sea. It analyzes the underlying reasons behind shortcomings in international law and their implication for Turkey's maritime geopolitics. Conflicts that involve maritime zones around Turkey have important legal dimensions. It is important to consider the historical reasons why Turkey faced maritime disputes in the Aegean and the Mediterranean Seas and resorted to hard-power policy instruments such as Blue Homeland to pursue its interests rather than reach a settlement under the UNCLOS regime. Based on the precedent of Turkish-Greek-Cypriot maritime disputes, this section aims not to argue for or against a country's or another's legal position but to demonstrate the shortcomings of the UNCLOS maritime regime to resolve them equitably. To do so, it traces the evolution of maritime law, the reasons behind Turkey's decision to not participate as a signatory to the convention, and how it became a source of contention with Greece/Cyprus due to not only differences in legal interpretation of the regime but also geopolitical factors. By highlighting conflicting interpretations of UNCLOS and the lack of jurisdiction in world courts to resolve competing

claims, this section illustrates why legal arguments could not forestall Turkey's Blue Homeland policy and expedited it instead. As Kutluk says, "Turkey's interests in maritime domains go in parallel with developments in international maritime law; before the 1950s-60s, international law was still in the making, so we could not act before then [to assert our rights]" (Kutluk int 2021).

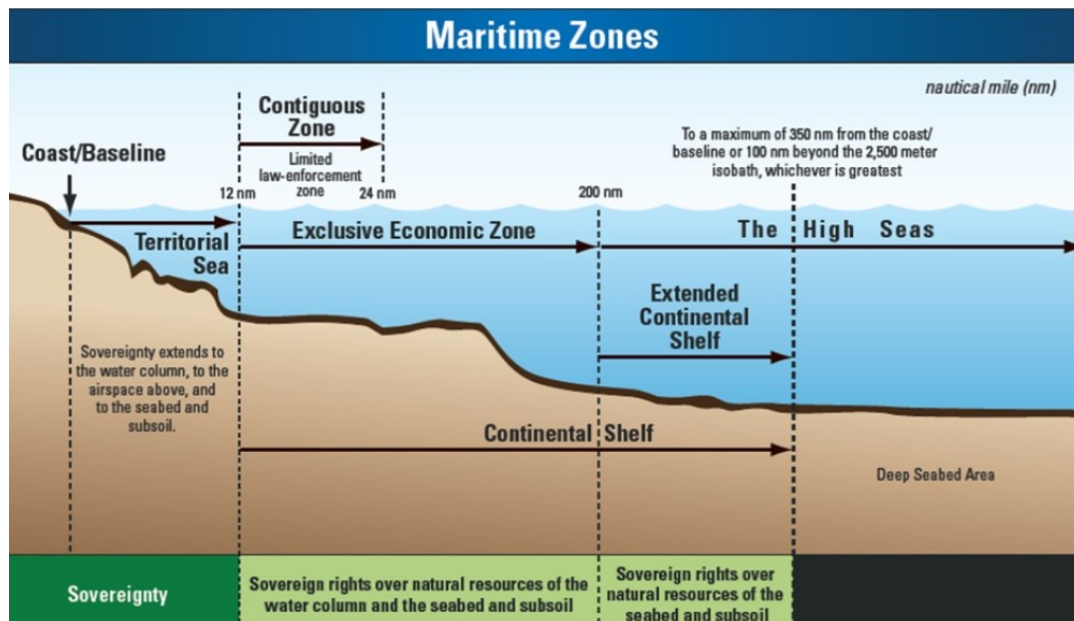
2.3.1. Maritime Zones Under the UNCLOS Regime

Maritime zones are the most crisis-prone regions of the world due to a disagreement on the equitable delimitation of resources therein. From a historical perspective, practice over centuries of sea-faring has been the engine for the accumulation of customs that helped regulate the rights and obligations of maritime nations and maintained the world order. In addition to these handshake rules, as globalization gained momentum after World War II, countries increasingly perceived "self-interest in the predictability and stability that law and legal relations bring to the international community" (Bederman 2010, 10). Most countries, including Turkey, believe that customary international law based on non-binding gentlemen's agreements may not be the most efficient way to deal with today's complex, technical problems. Accordingly, security interests and access to vast resources of offshore resources that are vital to economic growth prompted maritime states to regulate rights of sovereignty and usage of sea areas under an international agreement called the Law of the Sea. This necessitated a formalized approach to maritime relations, and states utilized the organizational capabilities of the UN to codify a global convention.

The outcome was a protocol to regulate conduct in maritime domains, finalized in 1982 and named the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III, or simply UNCLOS). This was not an easy outcome. UNCLOS meetings lasted from 1973 to 1982 and were the "longest international law negotiations ever" (Bederman 2010, 125). Almost thirty years after the UN held its first conference on Law of the Sea in 1958, UNCLOS was born as a codification of customary

international law and systematized rules of engagement that were previously based on observed practice and *opinio juris*⁵⁰ of nations. UNCLOS is a multilateral treaty that defines guidelines for the responsibilities and rights of nations in their use of seas. This last Law of the Sea conference in 1982 was the third since 1958 and hence has been named UNCLOS III.

Figure 11: Maritime Zones under the UNCLOS Regime



Source: US Department of Commerce, NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research, 2021

Maritime zones (Figure 11 above) are at the heart of UNCLOS. These zones define levels of assertion of control and jurisdiction that a state may claim over offshore resources, including the water column and seabed. The essence of delimitation in contested waters is affected by the supremacy of physical geography based on the principle that “land dominates the sea.” This means, for instance, waters under a state’s sovereignty are referred to as “territorial sea,” not “sea territory.” From a legal perspective, “Sea is an extension of land” (Gülay int 2021). Maritime delimitation is done according to relative equity of lands, which includes the length of coastlines, position of islands, distance to mainland, and proportionality of landmass. There are three zones

⁵⁰ *Opinio Juris*: An opinion of law that an action was carried out as an obligation.

of maritime jurisdiction most relevant to Turkey's disputes: territorial waters, continental shelves (CS), and exclusive economic zones (EEZ).

Article 3 of UNCLOS defines territorial waters as "Every State has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles" (UNCLOS 1982, 27). Indeed, Turkey has extended its territorial waters to 12 miles in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, and so did Greece in the Ionian Sea and Cyprus in the Mediterranean. If there is no objector on the adjacent/opposite coast, states apply a 12-mile regime per customary international law. Article 76:1 defines the CS as "The seabed and subsoil of the submarine areas that extend beyond its territorial sea throughout the natural prolongation of its land territory to the outer edge of the continental margin, or to 200 nautical miles from the baselines" (UNCLOS 1982, 53). Article 77:1 expands on this definition and outlines the regime that governs offshore activities, including drilling for oil and gas, by stating that "the coastal State exercises over the continental shelf sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring it and exploiting its natural resources" (UNCLOS 1982, 54). Perhaps equally important is a natural right of a coastal state that does not depend on any express proclamation. This is referred to as the principle of *ipso facto* and *ab initio*.⁵¹ Nearly one-quarter of the world's oil and gas reserves are located offshore (Bederman 2010, 125). This is an important potential source of conflict between states that might have competing sovereignty claims over CS. Articles 56 and 57 define the EEZ, which is congruent with CS up to 200 miles, and provide a coastal state with sovereign rights to exercise economic exploitation and exploration of the zone, the seabed, and its subsoil, as well as jurisdiction over offshore platforms and activities including marine fisheries (UNCLOS 1982, 43–44).⁵² The term

⁵¹ *Ipsa Facto* and *Ab Initio*: "By itself" and "From the beginning".

⁵² Of the global fish catch, "95% is taken within the 200-mile EEZs of individual coastal states" (Chasek, Downie, and Brown 2014, 208–9).

“EEZ” did not exist before 1982; it is an extension of the CS concept, but unlike CS, it does not fall upon as a natural right of existence on a state from the beginning and must be explicitly proclaimed to become effective.

2.3.2. Limitations of the UNCLOS Regime and International Dispute Settlement

The main issue with the UNCLOS maritime zones regime is that it leaves little to gain for geographically disadvantaged or zone-locked states like Turkey since even small, but well-positioned islands adjacent to another state (e.g., Greek islands) can potentially generate disproportionately large territorial seas and CS/EEZs.⁵³ The RoC, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Israel have declared their respective EEZs in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, Turkey and Greece have not yet done so due to conflicting interpretations of UNCLOS regarding the regime of islands. Ironically, Turkey delimited its EEZs in the Black Sea through peaceful means based on coasts of opposite mainlands during the height of the Cold War in the 1970s and 80s. Although the Black Sea was the soft underbelly of the Soviet Union and a theater of geopolitical contest, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Bulgaria did not hesitate to delimit their maritime boundaries with Turkey in 1978, 1986, and 1997. In other words, power politics is not necessarily an obstacle to applying international law, but legal disputes can exacerbate geopolitical power struggles. Until the issue of Crimea/Ukraine emerged, the Black Sea had been a much more stable maritime space than the Eastern Mediterranean, and Turkey has engaged in energy exploration projects in its EEZs with relatively greater peace of mind since 2019. This is partly why a group of retired admirals issued an open letter in April 2021 criticizing the AKP government’s alleged plans to revoke the Montreux regime that governs passage rights through the Turkish Straits. By placing limits on the naval activity at times of peace and war, the Montreux regime’s goal is to preserve stability in the

⁵³ For more details, please see the Ratio Analysis in the Appendix section.

region and “not upset the delicate equilibrium and spirit of cooperation” among the littorals (Gürdeniz int 2021b).

As home to the rich presence of living and non-living resources, maritime zones can be a source of contention between nations that dispute their sea boundaries if not delimited equitably. Experience of war and destruction over centuries of conflict has necessitated the establishment of a permanent international judicial tribunal to arbitrate, *inter alia*, disputes over state sovereignty in global commons. Arbitration of maritime delimitation disputes is a highly developed area of international law, and such disputes arising out of UNCLOS can be taken to the associated judicial bodies of the UN for arbitration. However, this is an effective yet under-utilized option. Only “3% percent of maritime disputes go to court” to settle their issues, but “there is 95% success rate if they do” (McLaughlin Mitchell n.d.). The first of these bodies, The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), has jurisdiction over maritime disputes concerning the interpretation or application of the Convention (ITLOS 2021). The other is the ICJ, established in 1945 as the principal judicial organ of the UN with jurisdiction over all disputes that could arise under international law. Article 287 of UNCLOS allows parties to choose a forum a-priori, which is encouraged. According to Posner, “The post-cold war liberal world order emphasized the idea that countries should use international tribunals rather than war to settle their disputes” (Posner 2014). These courts have equitably delimited maritime boundaries in even the most complex cases in the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East since the 1960s.

The history of litigations shows that, although the jurisdiction of ICJ is general and differs from that of specialist international tribunals such as the ITLOS, ICJ has been the *de facto* forum of choice for adjudication of contemporary maritime delimitation disputes, including exemplary cases such as Ukraine-Romania, France-Canada, UK-France, and Qatar-Bahrain. In fact, maritime

delimitation disputes have accounted for nearly “one-fifth of the ICJ’s schedule since 1969,” and the court has acquired “the trust of many nations around the world in rulings over border disputes” (Bederman 2010, 135). The intended positive effect of UNCLOS is that under policy coordination and facilitation of the UN, signatories would be less inclined to have disputes and more likely to resolve their differences via negotiation in good faith or court arbitration. Ideally, with lower barriers to dialogue, countries would bargain more effectively in the shadow of UN courts, and willingness to go to court would make them more amenable to settling their differences peacefully. Under an international maritime regime, countries would establish legal liability, remove information asymmetry, and reduce transaction costs to govern their maritime affairs (Keohane 1984, 83, 93). Thus, the treaty's purpose was to find a balance between advanced maritime nations/powers and developing nations; it originally meant to set a common language and formulate a uniform maritime convention applicable across the board.

However, such rational utility maximization did not manifest itself in Turkey’s maritime disputes with Greece and Cyprus. Hakan Karan says that “to achieve this goal [of balance], specificities of certain *sui generis* maritime domains such as the Aegean Sea have been purposefully ignored in UNCLOS negotiations; and to remedy this effect, it should have provided a reservation mechanism for concerned states, but it did not do so” (Karan int 2021). By and large, institutions and codification of UNCLOS reflect material interests and distribution of power among states in the 1980s, especially oceanic states with overseas interests (i.e., maritime powers) rather than coastal states (i.e., land powers). Rendering such special cases like the Aegean Sea to the effect of UNCLOS would bear inequitable outcomes (Karan int 2021). Aydın-Düzgüt adds, “Turkey has certain rightful claims, and it would be a futile attempt to try to put them altogether in the bin” (Aydın-Düzgüt int 2021). Skepticism toward UNCLOS is pervasive in military,

diplomatic, and legal circles not only in Turkey but also in the US, UAE, Israel, and Iran, which are more inclined toward securitization of maritime domains. Though 98% of countries are party to the convention, it is not unlawful to be non-signatory. The US, for instance, signed but did not ratify UNCLOS due to “conservative opposition to the convention’s provisions that would subject it to stricter environmental standards and prevent unilateral exploitation of the international seabed” (i.e., areas beyond national jurisdictions) (Gallo 2016).

2.3.3. *Interpretation of UNCLOS Articles and Competing Claims to Maritime Jurisdictions*

Until 1982, Turkey requested to put a reservation on three articles in UNCLOS: Article 3 about the “Breadth of Territorial Waters,” Article 15 about the applicability of the equidistance principle for “Delimitation of the Territorial Sea between States with Opposite or Adjacent Coasts,” and Article 121 about the “Regime of Islands.” Despite Ankara’s significant contribution to negotiations around the convention's wording, other parties rejected its request to insert reservations, leading Ankara to refuse to be a party to the treaty at the end. “Had Turkey been able to exercise that option, it would have signed the convention,” says Karan (Karan int 2021). Today, Turkey is in *de jure* persistent objector status to all provisions of UNCLOS since 1982, but in practice only to the following three articles.⁵⁴

Under Article 3, a state may claim up to 12 miles of territorial waters, but it is unclear what criteria should apply to determine the breadth of this zone, as in where/why it is equitable to have 3 miles vs. 6 or 12 miles. Here, UNCLOS is not sufficiently detailed; it has gray areas open to interpretation and leaves a lot up to negotiation between related parties. For the sake of uniformity, it creates dotted lines to be filled in by the parties concerned. Karan says, “If we go to court, it would invoke equitability principle and specificities of the Aegean Sea to request a re-adjustment

⁵⁴ The Montreux Convention (1936) is an example of the applicability of non-objector status; “It is binding by default for non-signatories such as Panama and Liberia because they do not object to it” (Karan int 2021).

of Greek territorial waters to even less than 6 miles” (Karan int 2021). Greece, by contrast, officially has a maximalist interpretation of Article 3, meaning “12 miles everywhere,” as shown in Figure 12 below. Karagiannis says, “What Greece cannot ignore is that UNCLOS gives every country the unilateral right to extend its waters to 12 miles. If a country is a signatory, it’s entitled to it” (Karagiannis int 2021). Therefore, as two Greek scholars who closely follow Turkish public opinion observe, “Most Turks feel Greece is a revisionist power, that it wants to alter the status quo in the Aegean from 6 to 12 miles” (Ifantis int 2021), but “The US and Russia are against Greek claims, too” (Filis int 2021; Heraclides int 2021). The breadth of maritime zones in the Aegean also has implications for Black Sea countries that transit the region, complicating the seemingly bilateral nature of the dispute. Gülay adds, “Serious, high-caliber Greek legal advisors like Markos Karavias and Harry Tzimitras do not hesitate to accept strong, valid aspects of Turkish claims on an unofficial basis, but the dominant view in the Greek government is that the Turkish position is ‘absurd’” (Gülay int 2021). “It’s a negotiation tactic,” says Karan, “I am also an arbitration lawyer and can tell you from experience that maximalist approaches usually bear better results for claimants in the international court, i.e., the bigger your target is, the more you earn” (Karan int 2021).

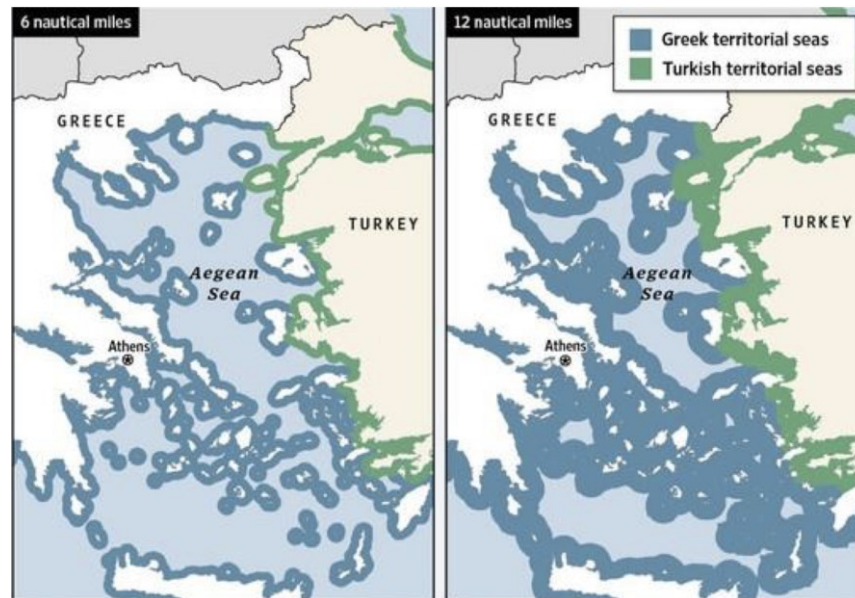
More moderate Greek scholars like Ioannis Grigoriadis are open to negotiating the possibility of multiple territorial water regimes in the Aegean with varying widths to reconcile positions, i.e., 6-10 miles on the East half and 12 miles on the West half (Grigoriadis int 2021). However, even a 1-mile increase in the breadth of Greek waters significantly restricts fisheries, transport, and access to half of Turkey’s coastal cities. This is a country where 60% of the population (50 million) lives near the coast and must keep its sea lanes open. The frequently referred right of “safe passage” through another state’s territorial waters is not really “safe” either since it is revokable and subjects

transit passengers of civilian nature to arbitrary checks and penalties under the disguise of coastal security.⁵⁵ Still, “Both sides come with maximalist positions as a negotiation technique,” says Grigoriadis (Grigoriadis int 2021). When asked if territorial waters may revert to 3 miles, at least on the eastern half of the Aegean, as per the *status quo ante* and balance of the Lausanne Treaty, all Greek respondents, except for Heraclides, refuse to consider the proposal. Klapsis rejects it out of hand: “No, it’s out of question. It’s impossible to have such an agreement that creates a distinction between one part and another part of the Aegean. It’s as if we say, ‘the western part of the Aegean is Greek, but the eastern part is not exactly Greek but rather somewhere in the middle’” (Klapsis int 2021). Such association of national identity with marine geography implies that Greece also has its own concept of *Mavi Vatan* (γαλάζια πατρίδα), which is the Aegean as a whole, except that it is just not called that way. Unfortunately, it closes the door to a negotiated settlement because identity-driven conflicts are non-negotiable. One may not relinquish his/her “Greekness” by conceding territorial waters. “To say otherwise to the Greek public opinion would raise two issues,” says Grigoriadis with a more practical argument: “1) Backtracking from 6 to 3 miles means giving up sovereign rights and requires a parliamentary decision [that a vast majority would reject], 2) Greece’s relative losses would be much more than Turkey’s, due to the number of islands and the total length of their coastlines” (Grigoriadis int 2021). Conversely, Turkey avoids the pursuit of accepting Greek views as “it would provide Greece with gains which can be converted to military advantage” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 17). Also, concessions would

⁵⁵ It also seals off the Aegean to any Turkish military exercise; a naval vessel transiting from say Gölcük Base in Marmara Sea to Aksaz Base in the Eastern Mediterranean would only be able sail quickly under strict conditions of passivity at peace time without any military observation whatsoever.

immediately “raise a public backlash and a call to label political leaders as ‘traitors’” (Karan int 2021). “Fear of losses dominates on both sides,” Grigoriadis concludes.⁵⁶

Figure 12: Map of the Aegean Sea, 6-mile vs. 12-mile Territorial Waters



Source: Wall Street Journal, 2013

Similarly, per Article 15, under normal circumstances, the rule of “equidistance,” which is the *de facto* method for delimitation, stipulates that if the coasts of two states are opposite or adjacent to each other, then the maritime boundary delimitation line should be drawn at an equal distance from each state’s shore baseline. However, the equidistance line can be altered in “special circumstances” (Bederman 2010, 135), whereby both parties or an international tribunal may consider devoting an exceptional treatment to islands situated right offshore another state, such as Greek islands close to the Turkish coast. Such a special consideration aims to remedy inequities that an otherwise geographically disadvantaged state might be subject to suffer. Nevertheless,

⁵⁶ Heraclides confirms that “back in 2003, Greek PM Kostas Simitis was afraid that if he agreed with Turkey [on Aegean Issues], this would be a liability in the forthcoming elections. So did Kostas Karamanlis in 2004 on Cyprus during the Annan Plan referendum” (Heraclides int 2021). Erdoğan is also in a loss frame of mind, which makes him prone to take high risks and protect his political legacy. In political psychology, “fear of losses” is associated with risk-seeking behavior such as insistence on maximalist positions and authoritarian tendencies under negotiation dynamics. Further research on the topic of leader’s image may complement the argument in this thesis.

Article 121 of UNCLOS entitles a naturally formed island to have the same status as other land territory and generate full CS/EEZ, except for rocks that cannot sustain economic life. This article did not exist before 1982, and outlying islands could not have a CS. The reason for its inclusion is that coastal states occupying island territories with particular dependence on fisheries, such as France, Japan, and Portugal, developed positions prior to and during UNCLOS negotiations that islands should be treated as any other land territory (Gau 2019, 3, 8, 14). As opposed to states like Turkey, which feared that “their maritime spaces would be reduced because of islands belonging to their neighbors,” the convention recognized the former group’s request and granted “same rights to islands as to continental landmasses” (Guillaume 2021). Gülay also agrees with Karan that such a convention cannot be applied universally: “The Aegean Sea has a special geographic status. It’s impossible to dictate such an ‘absolutist’ interpretation of the convention whose main purpose is to regulate conduct on high seas (oceans)” (Gülay int 2021).

Ever since the adoption of UNCLOS in 1982, for states less than 400 miles apart from each other, as in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, and in the absence of any pre-existing agreement, a problem of sovereignty arises due to overlapping maritime zones. In case of a dispute, boundaries should be delimited under an “equitable solution” as per Articles 74 and 83 of UNCLOS. Put together, these contradictory articles of 15, 121, 74, and 83 are a potential source of major conflict as countries often contest over what constitutes such an equitable solution. For instance, “Greek nationalists, warmongers, anti-Turkey people want to sign an EEZ agreement with Cyprus [based on the equidistance principle], but responsible Greek diplomats do not do, because this is the area where the Greek argument is the weakest,” says Grigoriadis, “It would bring lots of trouble to Greece, it would weaken our position immensely and make us appear as maximalists” (Grigoriadis int 2021). Similarly, retired admiral Cihat Yaycı, calls on the Turkish

government to unilaterally declare an EEZ even if, for instance, Egypt, Greece, and the RoC refuse to negotiate outside of UNCLOS' provisions (Yaycı 2019). Such a declaration could provoke retribution from the counterparties and leave Turkey in a politically difficult position.

2.3.4. *Applicability of the UNCLOS Regime to Turkey's Maritime Disputes*

The first issue in applying UNCLOS to Turkey's case is the choice of law. Article 38 of the Statute of the ICJ provides a prioritized list of available sources of international law, the most important of which are international conventions, also known as "treaties" (Trachtman 2014). UNCLOS is a legally binding international treaty that establishes a rule of conduct over all maritime disputes between signatory parties, including Greece and the RoC, which signed the treaty in 1982 and ratified it in 1995, but not Turkey (UNCLOS Declarations 2020). Naturally, it is not binding to non-parties of the treaty, including Turkey, the US, Iran, the UAE, and Israel. UNCLOS is a contractual law governed by the Vienna Convention on Law of Treaties and based on the principle of *jus tertii*,⁵⁷ it is not legally enforceable against a state that declines to sign and ratify it. Turkey is only bound by customary international law that had existed *ex ante* 1982. "This is a correct legal doctrine," says Gülay, "It is impossible to legally enforce clauses upon a persistent objector country" (Gülay int 2021). Greece holds that Turkey's non-signatory status to UNCLOS is irrelevant and maritime zones are not only part of treaty law but also customary law that each respective member of the international community must obey. This is also true, and Turkey refers to most articles of UNCLOS as replication of *ex ante* customary law and "binds itself by these" (Gülay int 2021). But there is no "one" law applicable across the board, "it is a dynamic concept" (Apankan int 2021). Maritime law consists of coded (treaty) law, customary law, and past dispute

⁵⁷ *Jus Tertii*: A right of a third party. In this context, it means the right of a non-signatory to UNCLOS.

settlement cases at international tribunals. Turkey's view is to take all these sources of law into account for solving maritime disputes, whereas Greece prioritizes treaty law.

The second issue toward a settlement is the jurisdiction of UN-mandated international courts. Before court litigation, parties to a maritime delimitation dispute should first seek a peaceful settlement through negotiations in good faith. If only such efforts fail in a reasonable amount of time, then resort to a procedure under the authority of the UN Charter, Article 36:3 (UN Charter 2021), that entails a binding decision as per Part XV of UNCLOS. Even then, countries hesitate to be obliged to delegate their sovereign rights to arbitration in the world court without careful consideration of its implications. China, for instance, declared in 2006 that it would “exclude ‘disputes concerning maritime delimitation’ from compulsory arbitration under Article 298 of UNCLOS” (Ying 2016). Turkey, on an unofficial basis and as a practice, “does not become a party to treaties that dictate dispute resolution mechanisms” (Gülay int 2021). Due to political costs associated with the diplomatic compromise with Turkey after years of “mistrust, pessimism, and fatigue,” Greek officials see a “ruling by the ICJ as the only face-saving option” (“Crisis Group: Turkey-Greece” 2021). However, although the official Greek position is to take disputes to the ICJ, Grigoriadis says, “There are those who don’t believe in international law or want to preserve *çözumsuzlük* (deadlock) on both sides; they do not want ‘to rock the boat.’ They are supported by NGOs like the Soros Foundation or American/German lobbies, making money from it. Therefore, most politicians prefer to kick the can down the road rather than *arı kovanına çomak sokmak* (to stir up a hornet’s nest) ” (Grigoriadis int 2021).⁵⁸ Hence, Greece put a reservation to ICJ’s jurisdiction under UNCLOS regime in 2015 on arbitration of issues concerning “national security

⁵⁸ “This is not specific to Greek-Turkish relations,” says Grigoriadis, “It also exists in other cases like the Israel-Palestine dispute” (Grigoriadis int 2021). The issue of sovereignty over the status of East Jerusalem, for instance, is a fundamental problem that involves religion, identity politics, geopolitics, and security altogether.

interests including territorial waters, air space, sovereignty over rocks/islets, CS/EEZ, and demilitarization of islands” (ICJ Declarations 2015).

The third issue concerns the political implications of legal disputes in the maritime domain. Keeping the competing interpretations of law in mind, Greece and the RoC leverage the legal case on a multilateral level within the EU to “demand Turkey’s acquiesce” (Ifantis int 2021) and show no flexibility to negotiate outside the convention’s stipulations. However, the EU has no competence in maritime disputes (Ülgen int 2021; Aydın-Düzgit int 2021; Karan int 2021; Gülay int 2021). A senior Turkish diplomat and Gülay explain why: “The relationship between Greece and EU is a matter of EU law, which Turkey is not bound by. From a strictly public international law perspective, this is a bilateral issue; if the EU claims sovereign statehood, it should make a formal statement. Even if Turkey’s actions in the Eastern Mediterranean are a violation of international law, then the only legal counterparty and the interlocutor competent to make a claim is Greece (or the RoC), not the EU” (Gülay int 2021; SDS-2 int 2021). In addition, “ICJ refuses claims emanating from a ridiculous map like the EU’s Seville Map, and Greece prefers to keep political pressure on Turkey by leveraging this issue on the EU fora than to settle it in court,” says Gülay, pointing to possible a political reason behind the reservation in Athens about litigation at the ICJ.

2.3.5. Challenges to Settlement of Turkey’s Disputes under the UNCLOS Regime

Since Turkey is a persistent objector to UNCLOS and Greece has reservations about arbitration procedures, even if parties go to the ICJ, the court would neither be able to identify a binding convention to accept the case nor issue a verdict on nationally sensitive issues. According to Ankara's request, it would have to refer to customary international law applicable prior to 1982, which Athens would duly reject. The only way to do so would be to negotiate a special agreement

(*compromis*) between Greece and Turkey, which is unlikely due to a disagreement on the list of negotiable issues in the first place. A senior Turkish diplomatic source says, “Turkey stands ready to resolve all outstanding bilateral issues with Greece through meaningful and genuine dialogue in accordance with international law, but since 1981 Greek political narrative suggests that there exists only one issue with Turkey, and that is the delimitation of CS/EEZ. This is a stumbling block toward peaceful settlement as it leaves other issues [territorial waters, air space, demilitarization of islands, sovereignty over islets/rocks] unchecked and as sources of potential conflict. These issues are closely intertwined. Ankara does not rule out the ICJ as a settlement procedure. However, it has to be part of a comprehensive solution to all outstanding issues” (SDS-2 int 2021). Turkey could even let go of “grey zones”⁵⁹ if only Greece would be sincere in negotiating an equitable package deal, says Ünal (Ünal int 2021). But Greece sees “package deal” as a problematic scheme to solve bilateral issues because it thinks that “Turkey tries to raise as many issues as possible so that in a package deal it will appear as if Turkey, let’s say, compromised on half of the issues then Greece will reciprocate to a certain extent, but all the bargaining would take place at Greece’s expense” (Klapisis int 2021).

Altogether, there are serious challenges to a peaceful settlement of maritime disputes around Turkey. Taking the self-interested state as the starting point, the distributive nature of Turkey’s maritime conflicts with Greece and the RoC are particularly prone to overshadow potential gains in efficiency, create irreconcilable differences, and reward zero-sum bargaining. This is primarily due to fundamentally opposing interpretations of international law that lend little to no space for mutually beneficial arrangements, even if placed under the light of an established norm like the UNCLOS. The parties concerned have not reached a consensus on topics to negotiate, the choice

⁵⁹ “Grey Zones” is a term that Greece uses to designate islands/islets under contested sovereignty with Turkey. This is further discussed in the next section.

of forum, and the choice of applicable law for international arbitration. Plus, there is little evidence that “international law factors as a significant determinant in foreign policy decision-making; usually it’s applied *ex post facto*” (Gülay int 2021).

Therefore, although UNCLOS provides the necessary legal framework to govern disputes arising out of high seas and sub-sea resources, “it cannot solve them” (Huxley 2019). Unless political will/incentive exists in related parties to solve their disputes peacefully, there is no enforcement mechanism to bring them to court and dictate a verdict. What could be an option until they establish a certain level of mutual trust is to “set up a condominium, an upper body to have a profit-sharing agreement and oversee maritime governance in disputed areas of the Aegean [and perhaps the Eastern Mediterranean]. Greece would then get a much larger share in comparison to its size and Turkey would gain a more equitable share of the resources” (Gülay int 2021; Ülgen int 2021). Karan affirms that “...under the President’s [Erdoğan] order, we investigate with TÜBİTAK possibility to replicate the joint-development partnership between Japan and South Korea in the Eastern Mediterranean” (Karan int 2021). But the two countries seem far from such as power-sharing agreement. In its absence, tools of power politics are more likely to sway international legal instruments for solving maritime disputes. International law does not preclude the emergence of an assertive policy such as Blue Homeland. As the next section illustrates, it even aggravates the intensity of conflicts due to perceived injustices by a geographically zone-locked coastal state like Turkey.

2.4. 1973, 1987 Aegean Crises and First Signs of Blue Homeland

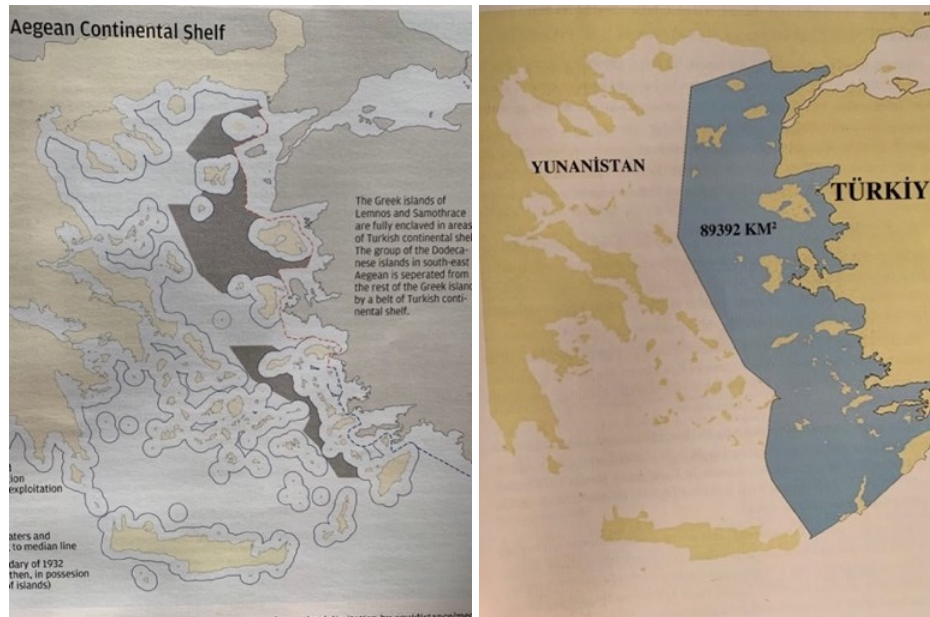
Considering different legal interpretations of maritime jurisdictions and rights, it is important to explore crisis dynamics in the Aegean and the Mediterranean Sea to uncover earliest signs of Blue Homeland policy in the 1970s. Before the Cyprus Problem reached a climax in 1974, a major

cornerstone in Turkey's maritime geopolitics concerning Greece was the Aegean CS Crisis in 1973. During the global economic crisis after the oil embargo in 1973, oil shortages acted as an external stimulus for the Turkish government to follow a hardline policy in offshore energy exploration and, this time, with enhanced activism in the Aegean Sea. Greece had granted oil exploration licenses in the Aegean since 1961 and claimed that islands are entitled to CS since 1972. When fuel prices skyrocketed during the Gulf oil embargo and the last Arab/Israeli War, Turkey also granted oil exploration licenses to TPAO in its Aegean CS overlapping with Greek claims on November 1, 1973.

Meanwhile, in domestic politics, there was a delicate balance among the republican center-left party CHP, the right-wing *Millî Görüş's* MSP, and the AP (Justice Party). The coalition government leveraged *Yavru Vatan* as a legitimization strategy over Cyprus and decided to act in the Aegean Sea against Greece to demonstrate its resolve over sovereign rights. "This was the earliest sign of the emerging Blue Homeland concept," says retired admiral Deniz Kutluk, "...for the first time, the then-Ecevit (CHP) government made a high-profile move to protect Turkey's interests in the Aegean CS by launching *Hora* seismic research vessel escorted by two destroyers" (Kutluk int 2021). The main point of contention in 1973 was that, still to this day, Greece denies the existence of "a natural break in the geophysical structure that could be regarded as creating two continental margins, one of Europe and one of Anatolia" (Acer 2017, 13). According to Turkey, "scientific data shows that there is a zone of discontinuity that divides the Aegean into two different parts starting at 23.5° East Longitude, 40° North Latitude and heading southeast toward the Med...The argument is that Greek islands situated east of this natural boundary sit on the sea-bed that is the natural extension of Turkish landmass under the sea" (Acer 2017, 14;

Apakan int 2021). As shown in Figure 13 below, areas demarcated for oil exploration in 1973 (left) roughly correspond to the contours of the *Mavi Vatan* map in 2020 (right).

Figure 13: Aegean CS Crisis, 1973-1976, Blue Homeland Map for the Aegean Sea, 2020



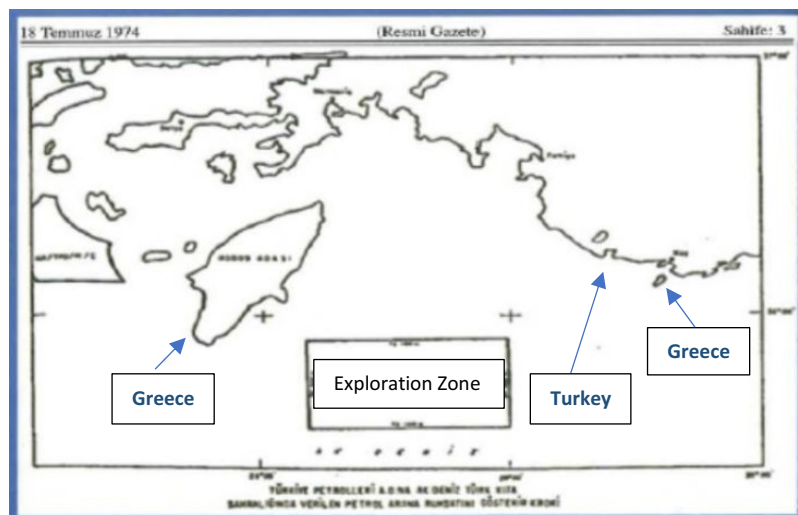
Turkish Oil Exploration Zones (in Gray), 1973-1976
 Source: Dimitrios Dages, Greece (2020)

Turkish View of the Aegean CS, 2021
 Source: Dr Cihat Yaycı, Turkey (2020)

Taking the Aegean Sea crisis as a precedent, on July 18, 1974, three days after the Greek coup in Cyprus, Turkey claimed its CS and issued an offshore oil exploration license for the first time in the Eastern Mediterranean (Figure 14 below) in just about the same area that it would reserve via a Navigational Telex (NAVTEX) 46 years later in 2020. Due to these competing claims of sovereignty, even before the Cyprus Operation in July 1974, declassified US intelligence reports from the spring of that year indicated the likelihood of a Turkish-Greek armed conflict over drilling rights and breadth of territorial waters: "...the issue of delimiting the continental shelf boundary and of oil exploration in this disputed area is likely to drag on, carrying with it potential for further damage to the NATO alliance... indications that Greece is considering extending its territorial waters to 12 miles have reportedly prompted a Turkish decision to challenge such a move. The extension would deny Turkey rights to almost all the Aegean continental shelf" (Papachelas

2021d).⁶⁰ As the crisis in the Aegean and the Mediterranean dragged on, Greece referred the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) without Turkey’s initial consent. However, the court refused to hear the proceeding due to a lack of jurisdiction (ICJ 1978). Despite reciprocated protests both ways, the crisis continued with ups and downs until the Bern MoU in 1976, in which both countries agreed to refrain from seismic research and unilateral exploration beyond their territorial waters in the Aegean CS.

Figure 14: Turkish Oil Exploration License Zone in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1974



Source: Turkish Official Gazette, July 18, 1974

The main point to take from these crises is that Turkey’s intervention in Cyprus in 1974 was its first use of force at sea during the republican era, but “it’s uncertain whether Ankara could rip off 1974 if a precedent didn’t exist in 1973 [over the Aegean],” says Kutluk (Kutluk int 2021). Turkey’s assertive posture in the Aegean and the Mediterranean set a precedent for crises in the following decades. From Greece’s perspective, Turkey gradually “returned to the Greek security culture as a threat after 1973-74, which set the strong perception of Turkey as a revisionist power

⁶⁰ Greece’s goal to extend its control to 12-mile territorial waters is the surest way to deny Turkey any CS in the Aegean. It would put 71.5% of the sea under Greek sovereignty and make any Turkish claims obsolete. 90%+ of the Aegean CS would then by default belong to Greece. For more details, see the Ratio Analysis in the Appendix section.

even among moderate Greeks” (Ifantis int 2021).⁶¹ This change of attitude in Greece toward Turkey is one reason why the Bern MoU put the Aegean CS issue on hold only temporarily until the next crisis erupted in 1987.

Taking the initiative once again, Greece granted oil exploration licenses to an international consortium of companies 10 miles off the coast of Tasos Island in northern Aegean, claiming exclusive rights to the continental shelf beyond 6-mile territorial waters. The second Aegean Crisis (1987) developed in the context of Turkey’s preparation under the then-Prime Minister Turgut Özal’s leadership to formally apply for membership to the EU (then called the EEC – European Economic Community).⁶² Against the odds of alienating the EU, Turkey first dispatched Hora seismic research vessel again (Figure 15 below). Then, it reacted forcefully to the Greek *fait accompli* on 27-28 March 1987 by escalating its military to full alert status and dispatched its naval units to the Aegean to prepare for an engagement with the Greek fleet. After intense US mediation efforts, the crisis de-escalated when Greece acquiesced to the withdrawal of exploration vessel(s) and returned to the *status quo ante* of the Bern MoU.

Figure 15: 1987 Aegean Crisis, “Critical 24 hours in the Aegean Sea”



Source: Sözcü, Cumhuriyet, 1987

⁶¹ Before, Greece’s archenemy was Bulgaria because of the Macedonia Issue in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In World War II, Bulgaria occupied northeastern Greece and was labelled as the main threat or “the enemy” (Ifantis int 2021).

⁶² Domestically, Özal enjoyed popularity among liberal reformers against statist practices of the Kemalist ideology. He was a pragmatic politician who represented a moderate version of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis doctrine that *Aydınlar Ocağı* (quarry of the enlightened) laid out the principles of with a manifesto in the 1970s. His ascendance after the military coup of September 12, 1980, and single-party right-wing government in 1983 provided a momentum to enact free-market reforms at home along with the rise of Islamic movements.

The 1987 crisis is an important case that demonstrates the limits of the West's normative power over Turkey even during the highly restrictive strategic environment of the Cold War. Against a clear and imminent threat, Turkey demonstrated a persistent *realpolitik* culture to defend its sovereign rights, applied coercive diplomacy against another NATO ally, and diminished its EU membership prospect to restore the *status quo* in the Aegean Sea. The Aegean remains off-limits to seismic exploration and drilling, which keeps international oil/gas companies away and maintains a relatively more stable strategic environment with fewer spoils for exploitation than in the Eastern Mediterranean. After the crisis in 1987, Greece vetoed Turkey's EU membership application in 1988, which marked a missed opportunity to resolve bilateral issues by leveraging the supranational organization's normative power over Ankara. The EU also formally rejected Turkey's application in 1989, but it would come back to the table a decade later in 1999 after crisis fatigue on both sides of the Aegean, and a new phase in the Cyprus Problem opened a window of opportunity for reconciliation. However, the Greek Cypriot rejection of the Annan Plan referendum to reunite Cyprus and subsequent accession to the EU in 2004 would mark another missed opportunity for a just and durable solution to settle the political dispute on the island.

3. The Two-and-a-Half Wars Doctrine, Kardak/Imia Crisis, and Toward Blue Waters

In the light of past crises and structural factors that contributed to maritime disputes around Turkey, the purpose of this section is to explore the major strategic preferences of Ankara after the end of the Cold War and the official release of the first naval strategy paper that formed a foundational pillar of the Blue Homeland policy in the mid-2000s. It explains how Kemalist strategic culture based on survival of the state (*beka*), territorial integrity, and security conditioned policy choices in Turkey after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, heightening its quest for strategic autonomy in the changing threat landscape of the post-Cold War period. The main

theme regarding Turkey's maritime policy between 1991 and 2004 was a structural change in the international system and its impact on threat perception in Ankara. Returning to NATO alliance diplomacy between Washington and Ankara, after the US lifted the arms embargo on Turkey in 1978, the US-Turkey relationship reset and partially recovered, "essentially because of the underlying security dynamics that argued for closer cooperation" against the Warsaw Pact (Ülgen 2021). The fundamental logic of the US-Turkey defense cooperation remained intact only due to the Soviet threat up until 1991. However, after the end of the Cold War and the rejection of Ankara's application for EU membership, Turkey's security focus shifted to border protection and internal security amid the return of old identity problems, Kurdish politics, and rising PKK terrorism. With increasing intensity from the mid-1990s, Ankara gradually developed a more assertive approach in the region at the cost of a widening rift with Western strategic policies. At the systemic level, there was an interim, unipolar period from 1991 to 2001. During this, the US united the entire world system with American liberal values and neoliberal economic order *a la* Francis Fukuyama's "End of History and The Last Man" thesis in 1992.

The major consequences of the global structural change for the US-Turkey relationship were, first, the disappearance of their shared vital enemy, the Soviet Union, and second, the divergence of their short-to-midterm interests, threat perceptions, and priorities in the Middle East after the First Gulf War in 1991 (TBE int 2021). "This is the root cause of all the issues in our bilateral relationship today," says a business expert from Washington (TBE int 2021). For two decades, until the mid-2000s, mainly Ankara's close relations with Israel in defense and intelligence-sharing utilized a lobbying power in Washington and maintained an impetus to keep Turkey as a bulwark, or a secular-democratic role-model country as often referred to, against Islamist fundamentalism in the Middle East. Turkey's geostrategic value on the southern flank of NATO was beginning to

diminish. The downside for Ankara was that, even with the Soviet threat gone, clarity of threats in the Aegean/Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East was still high, and the strategic environment in the unipolar world was not sufficiently conducive to taking a multilateral approach to foreign relations. Turkey was still firmly anchored to the West in its security and economic ties, to which there was no viable alternative. It needed to cultivate a new strategic paradigm based on Kemalist principles of the state's survival and sovereignty to address pressing security concerns in its neighborhood that were of less interest to NATO than before.

Figure 16: Turkey's Two-and-a-Half Wars Strategy, 1994



Türkiye'nin savunma planlamasını, "ikibuçuk savaşa" yani Ege ve güney cephelerinde aynı anda iki ve içerde körüklenecek "yarım" savaşa hazır biçimde yapması gerekiyor

Source: Milliyet (1994), the bottom line says: "Turkey should make its defense plan according to two simultaneous wars, one in the Aegean and another in the southern front, plus an internally instigated war (half).

In this context, Turkey's securitization of foreign policy gained a new dimension in 1994 when Ambassador (Ret.) Şükrü Elekdağ devised the "two-and-a-half wars strategy" in a publication by the Turkish MFA and Milliyet newspaper (Figure 16 above), arguing that "Greece [and Syria] constitute immediate threats to our vital interests and territories; therefore, Turkey should be capable to fight two conventional wars plus an internal security operation against the PKK simultaneously" (Elekdağ 1994). Based on principles of the state's survival, territorial integrity,

and security, this “military-geostrategic paradigm” has been one of the two main pillars of the Turkish doctrine since the 1990s, with the other being “active deterrence” – the active exercise of military power when needed (Kasapoğlu 2022). Linking this culture to maritime policy, Tziarras emphasizes that “the strategic thinking behind Blue Homeland did not start in 2006; if we go back to the 90s, we see the doctrine of the two-and-a-half wars. After the 80s and 90s, along with rising of the Turkish defense industry, this was the basis that eventually led to where we are today. Thereafter, Turkey began to expand its presence in the region through naval exercises like the Sea Wolf [1997]” (Tziarras int 2021). Notably, the persistence of “both the active-deterrence concept and the two-and-a-half war geostrategic paradigm in the 2020s” (Kasapoğlu 2022) renders further support to the persistence of a *realpolitik* strategic culture behind Blue Homeland’s emergence.

3.1. Kardak/Imia Crisis in 1996 and the Issue of “Grey Zones” in the Aegean Sea

Changes in the strategic environment and Turkey’s doctrinal shift had important implications for its maritime policy. This section illustrates how Kemalist strategic culture played out in another crisis with Greece over sovereignty in the Aegean Sea and provided further impetus to Turkey’s developing vision for the maritime domain. Shortly after Turkey released the two-and-a-half-wars strategy, Greece ratified UNCLOS in 1995 and claimed a unilateral sovereign right to extend its territorial waters to 12 miles at a time of its choice per Article 3 of the convention. Turkey considered this as a violation of its vital interests in the Aegean and declared that any attempt by Greece to do so would be countered by all means, “including military measures,” which has been ever since regarded as a clause for *casus belli* (cause of war) in Athens (TBMM 1995).

Simultaneously, the EU accepted the RoC’s formal application for membership to the union, in violation of the Cypriot constitution's 1960 London-Zurich founding agreements.⁶³ This was the

⁶³ 1959 London and Zurich Founding Agreements prohibit the RoC’s economic union with another country or accession to an organization which does not count both Greece and Turkey among its members.

opening move of “Greece’s foreign policy strategy between the late 1990s to early 2000s to import the Turkish-Greek disputes into the EU and turn it into a European issue” (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021; Ülgen int 2021). Over the years, it has succeeded to achieve this policy objective: “Ever since the union incorporated Greece and the RoC as members, it lacks an objective approach required to tackle the issue,” adds Aydın-Düzgit (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021). Due to the strategic culture in Greece, co-opting the EU in Greek-Turkish disputes has been a cross-party position and a matter of national identity and national role conception in Athens. Aydın-Düzgit opines that “Greece has a single agenda and that is Turkey: the political psychology of threat perception from Turkey there is greatly exaggerated [due to past history of hostilities], even to the extent of survivability; that’s how they formulate their ontological anxiety and insecurity” (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021).

1996 Kardak/Imia Crisis in the Aegean Sea broke out in the context of this strained situation. Over disputed sovereignty of a pair of rocks situated at roughly equal distance to the Turkish mainland and Greek islands nearby (Figure 17 below), the two countries came to the brink of war in January 1996. Turkey once again dispatched naval units in full-alert status and demonstrated resolve against Greek claims on the rocks, revealing a persistent *realpolitik* culture when Ankara faces a risk of loss of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and access to the Aegean Sea. With US President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke’s last-minute mediation efforts, the situation settled within a week. Both sides once again returned to *status quo ante* by withdrawing their armed forces from the rocks, but the crisis introduced the issue of “gray zones” into the thick dossier of Turkish-Greek disputes. This is a term that Greece uses to designate 152 islands/islets/rocks whose status is not clearly determined by international agreements, and each side claims its own. “I was personally involved in Track II diplomacy efforts in the 1990s for reconciliation with Greece,” says Ünal, “These issues were still present back then as are now”

(Ünal int 2021). One of the main distinctions between then and now is that Turkey was in a defensive position in both the Aegean and Cyprus. Greece had the initiative to claim ownership of maritime zones and territories. Turkey started to shift toward a more proactive stance after 2016 by pre-empting such claims.

Figure 17: Map and Photo of Kardak/Imia Rocks, Aegean Sea



Source: TRT World (2018), Thanos Davelis (2017)

Regarding Kardak/Imia rocks, as in other maritime disputes, the parties cannot agree on the subject matter of the dispute, the legal framework to apply, the jurisdiction of the arbitration body, the method of delimitation/ownership, and factors that might alter the course of the maritime boundary. The conflict remains frozen despite rapprochement between Greece and Turkey in the context of EU-Turkey relations. At the Helsinki Summit in 1999, the EU officially recognized Turkey as a candidate (Turkish MFA 2020). However, Greece continued to “walk the walk” and quietly extended its settlements to disputed territories in the Aegean from 2004 onward in detriment to the spirit of warming bilateral relations in 1999.⁶⁴ It built civilian infrastructure, military installations, and housing units to assert its presence over the “gray zones.” This is a major source of contention today and, for Yaycı, is even “the most fundamental issue in the Aegean” without a solution to which no progress should be expected on other files. Grigoriadis agrees, “The

⁶⁴ Several earthquakes of high magnitude (>6.5) in the second half of 1999 paved the way for rapprochement over mutual search & rescue, humanitarian aid, and relief missions between the two countries. Greece then lifted its veto over Turkey’s candidacy to the EU at the Helsinki Summit in December that year, but only in return for Turkey’s tacit approval for the RoC to start accession negotiations with the EU with a view for full membership by the mid 2000s.

most important issue item for Greece is to confirm Greek sovereignty over the Aegean islands/islets. This item moved Greece from technical discussions [over the Aegean] to survival mode” (Grigoriadis int 2021).

3.2. Kemalist Strategic Culture and the “Toward Blue Waters” Naval Strategy

Considering the influence of Turkish strategic culture as one of the main factors behind the Kardak/Imia Crisis in 1996, this section explains how Kemalist culture conditioned naval officers' strategic choices and enabled the emergence of a new naval strategy whitepaper titled “Toward Blue Waters” in 1997. It is important to highlight that the chief of the Turkish navy at that time was a Kemalist naval officer and a war veteran of Cyprus 1974 named Admiral (Ret.) Güven Erkaya. He made fame with his defense of the secular-Kemalist legacy and the fight back against the rise of radical Islam under Erbakan’s *Millî Görüş* RP in the 1990s. Erbakan faced limits to divergence from the defense establishment’s Kemalist principles and could not devise an alternative strategic culture, unlike what Davutoğlu did in the 2000s. Due to military oversight of politics and the so-called “post-modern coup” on February 28, 1997, by Erkaya and the army’s high-rank officers, “navalists enjoyed monopoly on strategic information and analysis” like their counterparts in imperial Germany and Japan fifty years ago (Snyder 1991, 38). Until 2002, domestic political institutions applied checks and balances over a fragmented political coalition between the Islamist RP and the center right DYP, constraining potential deviation from military supervision.

Memoirs of Erkaya and other naval officers from 1996 highlight that the navy played a key role within the state establishment to demand a forceful response against Greece during the Kardak/Imia crisis (Erkaya and Baytok 2001; Serdar 2020). In Grigoriadis’s view, “People like [Erkaya], Gürdeniz, and Yaycı who believe that UNCLOS’s provisions about islands is unfair to

Turkey created this Kardak/Imia issue or ‘gray zones’ to undercut Greece’s position.” “This was the first phase of Turkey’s militaristic posture, and *Mavi Vatan* is the second phase,” he adds (Grigoriadis int 2021). Grigoriadis further opines that “the same mentality that produced Kardak/Imia dispute in 1995-96 produced the Turkey-Libya MoU and *Mavi Vatan* in 2019.” This is a correct but incomplete statement, and it deserves more emphasis on strategic culture. Specifically, those officers indoctrinated with Kemalism at the war front in Cyprus 1974 like Erkaya were also the chief people in charge of Kardak/Imia operation in 1996. They codified the foundational principles of Blue Homeland as early as 1997.

Figure 18: Front Cover of the “Toward Blue Waters” Naval Strategy Album



Source: Turkish Naval Forces, 1997-2000

1997 saw the first-ever public release of a naval strategy document (Figure 18 above) in Turkey titled *Açık Denizlere Doğru* (Toward Blue Waters) upon Erkaya’s directive. The document reveals that it was the national slogan of a strategic redirection in the navy to move beyond green/coastal waters and become a mid-size regional power (*Açık Denizlere Doğru* 2000). As analysis of the timeline of events in previous sections shows, this strategic thinking process started in the late

1960s/early 70s, continued with the 80s, accelerated in the 90s, and peaked in the 2000s (Gürdeniz 2013, 190–91). The progenitor of the concept, Kadir Sağdıç, one of the 104 admirals who is charged for signing the open letter against the revision of the Montreux regime in 2021,⁶⁵ says that the “Toward Blue Waters” concept has a direct link to Atatürk’s forward-defense doctrine in the 1920s: “We learn and teach it at the Naval War College how Rauf Orbay and Atatürk suffered without a navy during World War I and the Independence War” (Sağdıç int 2021). The album’s intro section refers to Atatürk’s directive in 1924 as “an indispensable objective for the republic.” Also, it highlights certain “centrifugal trends that have shaped the US-Turkey relationship since the end of the Cold War” (Ülgen 2021):

“...The increasing importance of Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean due to emerging new energy fields have opened new horizons as well as new uncertainties before Turkey in the post-Cold War era... The new direction of the Turkish navy in the new century is *Toward Blue Waters*. This is the result of increasing welfare and a society with ever-growing maritime consciousness. In the twenty first century, Turkey has all the resources to reach the ideal of becoming a maritime state, which is dictated by its geography” (*Açık Denizlere Doğru* 2000).

For an astute naval observer like Güvenç, this was a “transformational initiative that firmly designated gunboat diplomacy as an instrument of Turkey’s coercive foreign policy” (Serhat Güvenç 2019). The Turkish navy’s mission began to “shift toward high seas” (Gürdeniz int 2021b; Sağdıç int 2021). The largest naval exercise of the time, Sea Wolf 1997, the completion of Aksaz Naval Base in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2000, and permanent basing facilities for submarines were hallmarks of this emerging strategic paradigm based on Corbett’s principles of a forward-

⁶⁵ Gürdeniz was the Project Coordinator of the *Açık Denizlere Doğru* album and ranked as a Captain in the navy.

defense and strategic blockade. For public awareness, Erkaya also resurrected an Ottoman-era tradition to salute Barbaros Mausoleum (chief admiral's tomb) in Beşiktaş, Istanbul, after the fleet's parade in Bosphorus in the late 1990s, indicating that, well before the AKP era, there were attempts to emphasize Ottoman naval heritage and link it to strategic thinking.

On strategic reasons behind the “Toward Blue Waters” strategy, Sağdıç highlights that the US Navy aimed to develop its coastal water capabilities during the First Gulf War and called this work “From the [High] Seas” with the priority to undertake mine sweeping, sea lane protection, port control, and counter-terrorism missions in the Middle East (Sağdıç int 2021). While the US/NATO focused on securing coastal waters, Turkey was “keen to sail on high seas and transfer itself to the upper league of ocean-going fleets,” says Sağdıç, “...our strength was in brown-green waters, but after the Cold War, the navy needed a new mission, a new breath” (Sağdıç int 2021). After years of crisis in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, naval planners aspired to transcend the traditional Greek-Turkish rivalry and look toward blue waters as an area of strategic presence. “The Pentagon publishes its naval force structure and plans for public diplomacy time to time; we asked ourselves then ‘why not do a similar work?’,” says Sağdıç, “When General Çevik Bir⁶⁶ was the Deputy Chief of the Defense Staff in 1997, we invited the General Staff and major Turkish military-industry companies to our Naval HQ for a briefing and presented our new plan. With the goal to become a blue-water navy and be able to do power projection, we jointly prepared a document titled ‘Toward Blue Waters.’” He adds, “This was Turkey’s first naval strategy white paper to explain our vision, force structure, and operational priorities for the long term” (Sağdıç int 2021). The strategic foundation encoded in that book, as outlined above, would form the basis of the Blue Homeland concept in 2006.

⁶⁶ Çevik Bir is currently serving a life sentence on alleged charges to lead a coup during the February 28 (1997) period.

3.3. 9/11 Terrorist Attacks, The New World Order, and Turkey's Strategic Re-Orientaion

Just as Turkey's strategic paradigm was undergoing a major re-formulation through the two-and-a-half-wars doctrine and Toward Blue Waters strategy, the US-led unipolar liberal world order faced a new foe after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and military interventions in the Middle East – radical Islamism. Many interviewees refer to the decline of bipolarity and the US unilateralism in the 1990s and early 2000s as major structural reasons that accelerated Turkey's heightened insecurity and drift away from the Western sphere of influence. The post-2001 paradigm of spreading liberal values by force encountered challenges in nation-building and democratization experiments in the region, the impact of which culminated in global fatigue, mistrust, and strategic inertia to tackle the most pressing problems of security, welfare, and human rights in Middle Eastern societies. Effects of this shift are felt even today. Resurgent micro-nationalisms and religious extremism engulfed the neighborhood in economic stagnation, social cleavages, and civil unrest, if not outright hostilities. Identifying “nationalism as the most powerful political ideology on the planet,” Mearsheimer observes that “the liberal order's tendency to privilege international institutions over domestic considerations clash with key issues such as sovereignty... and nationalism trumps liberalism whenever the two clash” (Mearsheimer 2019, 8). So, when faced with competing nationalisms, the “late 90s/early 2000s vision of an expanding liberal order which was going to turn the entire Middle East into European style harmony went down” (Danforth int 2021).

The events of 9/11 and troubling counter-insurgency wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, [and later Libya, Syria] exploded Fukuyama's “end of history” myth in tense, new geopolitical rivalries along multiple axes. Still, unipolarity was at its zenith during the US invasions in the 2000s, and “it was like an almighty” (Ünal int 2021)—America was unmatched in military power. Divided

along multiple identities, the Middle East was at the forefront of essentialist claims, engulfed in an “us” vs. “them” culture. Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis seemed to gain the upper hand against his former student Fukuyama’s liberal paradigm. Islamophobia substituted the communist threat after the Cold War. However, more critically, as the US overstretched in multiple theaters and did not commit in a way that would stabilize those situations, “it stoked antibodies in those countries [like Turkey]” that, as a reaction to US interventionism, “began to see Washington as a threat” (Outzen int 2021). Thus, nation-building experiments badly unsettled a pro-western bloc in the Middle East, “Turkey being a prime example” (Outzen int 2021), and diverted it to seek alternative security measures.

This new strategic environment had three major implications for the US-Turkey relationship. First, located in an ever-more complex conundrum where uncertainty, turmoil, and aggressive competition, rather than cooperation, increasingly became the new benchmark. “Turkey’s worst fears came to reality/fruition,” says Outzen, pointing to the perennial anxiety in Ankara about territorial integrity, sovereignty, and security.⁶⁷ Second, Turkey was associated with the SACEUR during the Cold War, but when the US focus of activity shifted from Europe to the Middle East, CENTCOM emerged as the new command center with which Turkey had had no history. A sense of trust deficit began to settle in on both sides after 2003 and, as the breakdown in military relations reached a climax with the March 1st incident and *Çuval Hadisesi* (The Hood Incident),⁶⁸ an

⁶⁷ Fanned by blockbuster movies like *Kurtlar Vadisi Irak* (Valley of the Wolves Iraq), opinion polls showed that the Turkish public came to see the US as a major threat to national security after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

⁶⁸ On March 1, 2003, Turkish parliament vetoed basing and passage of US armed forces in Turkey to open a front against the Saddam regime in Northern Iraq. On July 4, 2003, what many commentators in Turkey saw as a retaliation and insult, the US forces in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, raided a Turkish military base, arrested a group of Turkish Special Force members, and put hoods over their heads on the way to an interrogation site. This was the “Hood Incident”. People such as the former Army Chief Gen. (Ret.) İlker Başbuğ refer to it as the “smoking gun” for Turkey’s struggle against Gülenists thereafter. His counterfactual claim is that had the US-deployment bill passed on March 1st, US-Turkey military-to-military ties would remain intact and Gülenists would not have found the support to launch *Bahyoç* and *Ergenekon* coup plots in 2008 (Başbuğ 2019).

irreparable wedge opened in bilateral relations; one that would leave an even deeper scar than the 1975 arms embargo. “This trust deficit carried on for twenty years, and by and large, the trajectory of this [US-Turkey] relationship is overwhelmingly negative,” says Outzen (Outzen int 2021). Turkey could not rely upon a common doctrinal/strategic approach with NATO to secure its periphery anymore, and “Ankara made its independent strategic assessment,” adds Outzen. “There emerged a need for new top-level policy thinking and military doctrines like Blue Homeland in Turkey” (Outzen int 2021). Third and last, Turkey’s own defense-industrial development (SSM) tried to become independent in production with an accelerating trend after the mid-2000s, and when Ankara’s defense procurement from the US decreased, “it lost its #1 backer in Washington DC in terms of lobbying, the Department of Defense” (Outzen int 2021).

From Ankara’s perspective, the US would not pay careful attention to Turkey’s vital national interests by unilaterally going after an experiment to re-design the Middle East. In Washington’s strategic calculus, with Middle East dictatorships under control and NATO/EU expansion eastward gaining pace to contain Russia, Turkey was no longer an indispensable ally. Two notable positive developments of that era stand out, however: one, Turkey contributed to NATO’s maritime mission “Operation Active Endeavour” and STANAVFORMED in the Eastern Mediterranean to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and two, Turkey took the initiative to set up BLACKSEAFOR with Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, and Georgia to enhance cooperation among littoral navies and promote stability in the Black Sea (MOD Russian Federation 2021). Although the Black Sea task force has been suspended since 2015 due to crises in Ukraine and tensions with Russia, the associated “Operation Black Sea Harmony” launched in 2004 – with its HQ located in Ereğli, Turkey – to contribute to the maritime security in the Black Sea continues, at least on paper (Turkish Navy 2021). This important initiative reflects Turkey’s

interest to find a new regional balance between NATO and Russia to keep control over its “strategic backyard” in the Black Sea (Gürdeniz int 2021b) and maintain its security amid rising uncertainty in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean in between early-to-mid 2000s.

In this new normal of shifting priorities and partnerships around Turkey, a systemic stimulus intensified Ankara’s anxiety regarding its old maritime disputes and expedited an assertive outlook to its near abroad in the Mediterranean. That was the re-emergence of the Cyprus Problem with a maritime dimension in the context of the Turkey-EU relations. By 2002, the RoC had negotiated an EEZ delimitation agreement with Egypt in a unilateral move. It was ready to submit the list of geographical coordinates defining the border line to the UN on February 17, 2003 (UN 2021). Expecting to join the EU in 2004, the RoC leveraged maritime zones and potential energy deposits to pressure Turkey for reconciliation between Turkish/Greek communities and an end to the division on the island. However, the area Cyprus marked as its EEZ clashed with Turkey’s CS, which prompted a forceful reaction from Ankara.

Figure 19: The “Northern Access” incident and Turkey’s CS in the Mediterranean, 2002



Source: Önce Vatan (2018), the left line says: “Area of warning for Northern Access,” the right line says: “Area of intrusion into Turkish CS by the RoC.”

On March 17, 2002, Turkey blocked a Norwegian seismic research vessel named “Northern Access” operating on behalf of the RoC off the western coast of Cyprus (Figure 19 above). Apakan

says, “I was the Director-General of Greece-Cyprus desk at the MFA in 2002, it was under my knowledge that the navy removed Northern Access from our potential CS area in the Eastern Mediterranean” (Apakan int 2021). This was Ankara’s first state practice, a joint decision by the MFA and the MoD to demarcate and defend the country’s CS in the Eastern Mediterranean, a move that would set in motion a series of escalatory reprisals for the next two decades between Turkey, Greece, TRNC, and the RoC, where Blue Homeland strategy played a major part.

This chapter showed that the ideas, experiences, and directives of Atatürk have had a major impact on perceived insecurity and perennial anxiety about the maritime domain in Turkish strategic thinking. Thinking behind Ankara’s maritime policy of ‘forward-defense’ reflects a persistent, *realpolitik* strategic culture based on Kemalist principles. Turkey’s maritime interests expanded over the past six decades because of structural factors, changes in the relative distribution of capabilities, and challenges to the state’s survival/sovereignty (*beka*). Hard-power instruments gained latitude over international normative powers such as the UNCLOS and the EU and set foundational pillars of Turkey’s emerging naval doctrine of Blue Homeland by 2002: Ankara declared an EEZ in the Black Sea and initiated Operation Black Sea Harmony to guard its strategic interests for a stable, cooperative atmosphere in the region; firmly defined and defended its positions on the Aegean Sea maritime issues; maintained a foothold in Cyprus; actively engaged in delineating its CS/EEZ in the Eastern Mediterranean; and proposed a strategic re-orientation for the Turkish navy to assume a blue water posture and implement a forward-defense game plan. As Atatürk’s vision in 1924 was turning into action step by step, the missing piece was an umbrella term covering all these areas, a powerful phrase to be used as a shorthand for convenience in public discourse and politics. However, it would not be a straight-forward task to introduce an all-encompassing term, much less to make it acceptable for everyone in Turkey. On the domestic

front, in November 2002, the AKP won the general elections and earned most of the seats in the parliament to form a *Millî Görüş*-oriented government with support from the Gülenists and pro-European liberals. Despite a frozen conflict in Cyprus over the “Northern Access” incident, the AKP’s leadership—Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, and Ahmet Davutoğlu—decided to take a more conciliatory approach toward the RoC, start bilateral exploratory talks with Greece on Aegean issues, and adopt EU harmonization packages including constitutional amendments to open space for political Islam in domestic politics. As the next chapter elaborates, their new initiative of soft-power-based diplomacy and liberalization was the manifestation of an alternative strategic culture against the dominant Kemalist culture.

Chapter 5: Evolution of Turkey's Maritime Policy: 2004-2021

The most momentous turns in the trajectory of Turkey's maritime policy were in the period between 2004 and 2021. This chapter employs the neoclassical realist framework outlined in Chapter 3 to show that, based on earlier republican foundations, the maritime policy activism branded as Blue Homeland evolved gradually through a complex interaction of geopolitical and domestic factors. The first subset of questions it addresses is "What factors in the regional geopolitical constellation and domestic political dynamics have guided the Turkish foreign policy since 2004? Why did Blue Homeland emerge in 2006 and what significance does the quest for energy security have in its ascendance?". As the study reveals in the following sections, the main difference between previous decades and the post-2016 era is that Blue Homeland's policy prescription ceased to be just a proposed naval doctrine within the military realm, and instead acquired both practical and symbolic dimensions in the political realm. The interest deficit between Turkey's rising relative power and its acknowledged role in the system since the 2010s created tensions that the country has tried to bridge by acting more assertively. Blue Homeland is an instance of foreign policy re-orientation toward securitization in Turkey.

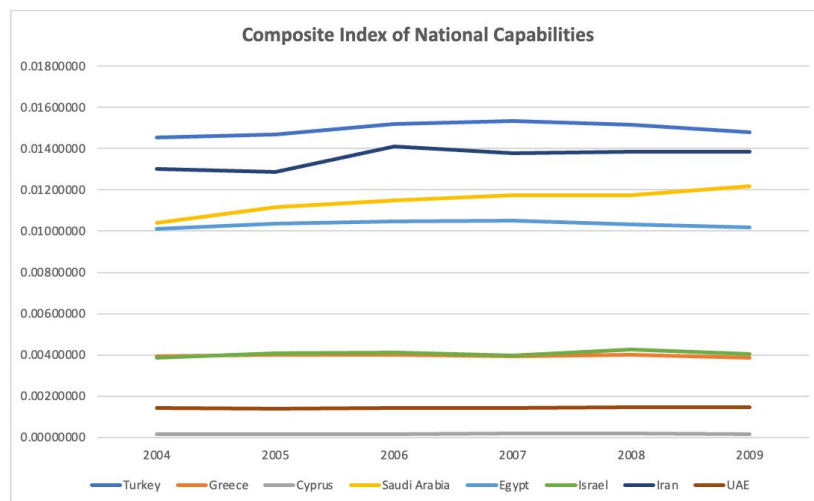
In accordance with the policy shift to hard-power security, the AKP government began to express its policy preferences in more threatening, conflictual, and culturally appropriate, *realpolitik* language than before. The Turkish naval assertiveness unmistakably became more discernable in accordance with regional geopolitical imperatives and a more highly consolidated authoritarian regime in its governing coalition. The emergence of a hybrid strategic culture, one that is based on Kemalist principles but imbued with the AKP-MHP's Turkish-Islamic synthesis and *ulusalçı*-Eurasianist motifs provided the most powerful impetus to the rise of naval activism. Political language around the *Vatan* concept provided popular legitimacy to the new political

consensus in Turkey. The second set of sub-questions the chapter addresses are “What are the implications of political legitimization via the *Vatan* concept on Blue Homeland’s discourse? Why did the government realign its Blue Homeland rhetoric and backtrack into a *détente* after 2020?”.

1. Liberalization and the EU Journey: 2004-2010

Tracing changes in foreign policy starts with an analysis of structural factors, systemic stimuli, and relative distribution of power in the region. The strategic environment around Turkey in 2004 was more permissive than from 2001 to 2003 for several reasons. The Middle East heightened in importance after the US invasion of Iraq, and though the resultant complex security environment created uncertainties, it also presented opportunities for Ankara to re-calibrate its vision for the region. Its relative capabilities were almost on par with the neighbors or even behind some others. In 2005, Turkey ranked only in the twentieth place on the global firepower index (GFI 2021), lower than Saudi Arabia (15), Iran (7), and Israel (10); The situation would change dramatically by 2007 and within two years Turkey would jump to the eighth place in the GFI rank. Similarly, in the index of composite capabilities in Figure 20 below, Turkey ranked only marginally higher than its peers in 2004; by 2010 it would surpass them all and maintain its first place.

Figure 20: Index of National Capabilities (CINC), 2004–2010



Source: The Correlates of War Project, 2004-2021 (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972)

Crucially, after the breakup of military-to-military ties between Washington and Ankara in 2003, the AKP's civilian cadres felt ample geopolitical slack in the early to mid 2000s, thanks to repositioning of Turkey's perceived brand image abroad as a more amiable, useful partner and a role-model, democratic-Muslim-majority country. In contrast to the 1990s, such optimism meant it was far less clear whether Greece and Cyprus (hence the EU) represented an imminent threat to be contained or neighbors to be engaged and co-opted. The AKP's policy of rapprochement with the EU and liberal reforms at home provided enthusiasm in Western capitals for de-securitization of intractable conflicts in Cyprus, the Aegean, and the PKK terrorism. Heraclides explains this era (1998–2008) as “a ten-year thaw in the traditional cold war between Turkey and Greece” (Heraclides 2008, 181). Policies of the 2004–2010 era adhered to neoliberal institutionalist approaches to identify shared interests and maximize utility through policy coordination, labelled as the “zero problems with neighbors” strategy. Under this logic, international regimes like UNCLOS have power and authority for solving problems and avoiding unnecessary conflict (Keohane 1984); favorable agreements under multilateral organizations like NATO lock-in leading (US) and subordinate states (Turkey) into mutually beneficial arrangements (Ikenberry 2001); and global institutions help bridge information gaps by reducing transaction costs between, for instance, Turkey, Greece, TRNC, and the RoC. The next section walks through how structural factors filtered through the AKP's domestic political priorities produced a more cooperative, soft-power-based policy response to systemic stimuli.

1.1. De-securitization and Liberalism in Turkish Strategic Culture during the AKP Era

The purpose of this section is to explain how an alternative strategic culture emerged against the dominant Kemalist paradigm and what its policy consequences were for Turkey's maritime security. Particularly, it shows why Turkey shifted from its traditional, conflictual stance of the

90s-early-2000s to a more cooperative economic and security position between 2004 and 2010, and how that affected its foreign relations. There are both systemic and domestic factors behind the emergence of an alternative foreign policy consensus in 2004. First, a permissive external environment provided “greater sway to ideas and ideology in domestic politics over foreign policymaking” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 159). Political identity is closely related to self-perception and beliefs about a state’s role. Since 2002, the AKP government leveraged Islamism as identity politics and strived to create a strong pious middle-class in the country’s Anatolian heartland. A major part of state-society relations is “distributional competition among societal coalitions to capture the state and its associated spoils” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 71). The political system in Turkey favors lobbying a few legislators rather than large mass movements, and therefore this affluent, rising new class of small-to-medium-size businesses in Anatolia – the new Turkish bourgeoisie – formed their own trade associations and began to lobby the government for trade expansion. Snyder argues that “late, late industrialization, as in [Turkey and] Russia is associated with immobile, concentrated elite interests and cartelized politics” (Snyder 1991, 43–44). The AKP began to re-distribute internal power/capital in 2002 but only from one cartelized group to another, namely from Istanbul-based conglomerates to Islamists in Anatolia. From an inside-out perspective, the commercial orientation of this growing middle-class advanced a strategy of “zero problems with neighbors” to ratchet up its own coalitional power. The goal would be to consolidate the “community of Muslim believers, or the *Ummah*” (Calder 2019, 41) around a vibrant regional economic bloc with its center in Turkey. The AKP cleverly leveraged it as a PR strategy to do business in the post-Ottoman space.

Such an environment with less clarity and low immediacy/magnitude of external threats but one of opportunities “provides greater room for alternative strategic cultures” (Ripsman,

Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 14). Davutoğlu's popular book titled "Strategic Depth,"⁶⁹ published in 2001, served just that purpose; it was the key guiding principle for the AKP's foreign policy for at least a decade. He was the "first intellectual to devise a rationalistic and pragmatic Islamist foreign policy" (Özkan 2014, 120–21); his book presented a clear departure from the traditional stance of the earlier Kemalist vision and promoted regional activism for Turkey based on unique endowments of its geostrategic location and historical depth. However, Özkan posits that "contrary to Davutoğlu's assertions and those of Islamist intellectuals, his foreign-policy vision is not original, but imported" (Özkan 2014, 122). His recommendations fit into the 90s-early-2000s' "expanded liberal order idea about increasing trade ties, diplomatic contacts, and connectivity of the region" (Danforth int 2021). Drawing inspiration from "Western imperial geopolitics, his work combines theory and practice similar to the effect of Mahan, Mackinder, Spykman and Haushofer...perhaps justifying the label given to him by certain journalists: 'the Kissinger of Turkey'" (Özkan 2014, 122). This was the bedrock of Davutoğlu's policy framework that, in the interest of security, a more self-confident Turkey should build on its Ottoman cultural heritage, capture the lost imperial grandeur, and expand its soft power to construct an imagined community based on religious identity. He argued that the diversification of Turkey's ties does not have to come at the expense of its relations with the West. Davutoğlu was not alone in his thinking. As Ifantis observes, "in hindsight, the agenda and ambition to see/turn Turkey to a regional powerhouse was always there" (Ifantis int 2021), and Ünlühisarcıklı points out that this idea of "multi-axial diplomacy" associated with the AKP for the last twenty years actually pre-dates

⁶⁹ "Strategic Depth" was Turkey's semi-official grand strategy document. Ünver Noi highlights that the EU published strategy directives starting with "Solana Papers" in 2003 to form a common foreign and defense policy. "If only Turkey had one [an official, publicly available document], it would have supported mutual understanding and helped to explain other countries what its goals, plans, and instruments are" (Ünver Noi int 2021).

Davutoğlu and “goes back to the center-left CHP’s foreign minister İsmail Cem’s theory behind it, both for the Middle East and North Africa, and Central Asia” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021).

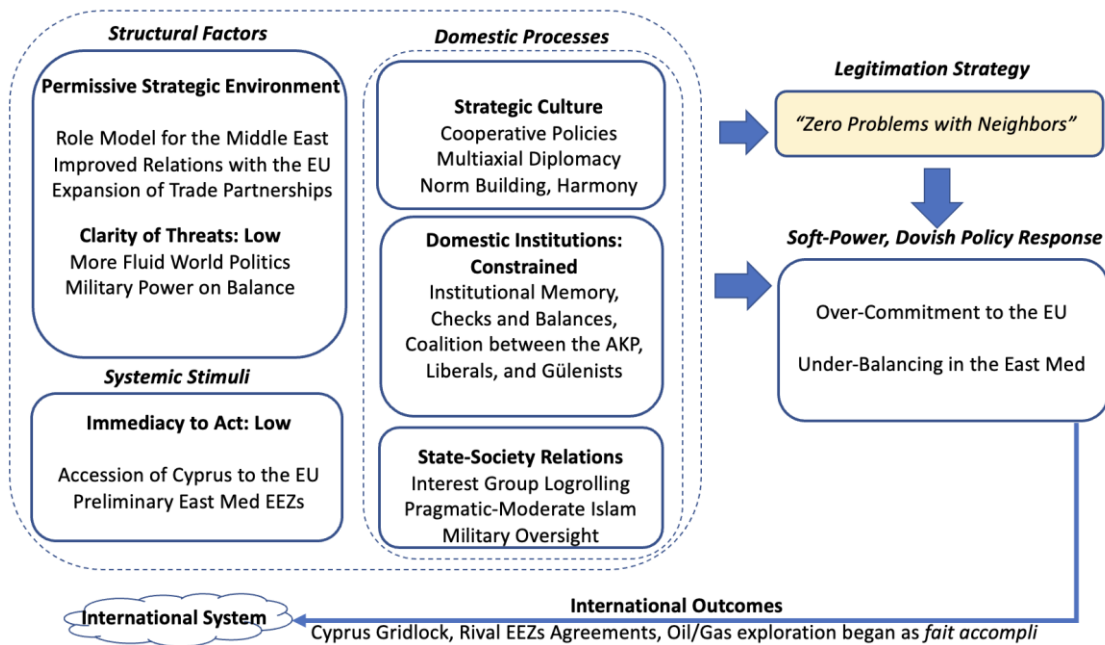
Second, the AKP government set ambitious foreign policy goals in the Middle East since 2002 to elevate its role to the rank of regional power and to regain the lost grandeur of the Ottoman Empire. Its top cadres under Davutoğlu’s guidance strikingly attempted to redefine Turkey’s strategic culture and reorient geopolitical discourse from a “defensive, secular nation-state” model to a “proactive, neoliberal-civilizational” one (Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi 2020, 69). Progenitors of this new concept of “zero problems with neighbors” adhere to the idea that strategic realities are culturally constructed. With roots in *Millî Görüş* tradition, they leveraged the opportunity of EU candidacy to re-design the domestic sphere and foreign policy based on moderate-Islamist values. This was a reworking of Atatürk’s alleged aphorism in 1931 – “*yurtta Sulh, Cihanda Sulh*” (peace at home, peace in the world) – along with liberal motifs. Instead of the preservation of stability in a chaotic region, the AKP “emphasized building bridges with Turkey’s neighbors” (Finkel 2012, 76–77). Ünal and Mufti call it the “counter-paradigm” against Kemalism’s “dominant strategic paradigm” (Ünal int 2021; Mufti 2009). The aim of this shift was to make Islamic conservatism compatible with neoliberal globalization and present a role-model country to eradicate radicalism in the Middle East. By the plan, Turkey would become a more constructive actor in regional politics and shed the rigidity of Kemalism’s supposedly inward-looking, outmoded policies. Jenny White observes that Davutoğlu’s approach aimed to re-integrate the region under *pax-Ottomana* but avoided using the hegemonic term “neo-Ottomanism” to prevent raising Arab sensitivities (White 2013, 51). A downside was that, due to such fundamental changes in foreign policy and the AKP’s failure to explain itself sufficiently, “Washington perceived an expansionist, neo-Ottomanist Turkey during that era” (TBE int 2021).

Davutoğlu's was a grand project beyond simply an Islamist agenda, as Outzen highlights: "People who synopsisized 'Strategic Depth' in the US have emphasized Islamism of the 1980s-90s as the dominant narrative, but I see it essentially as geopolitical work: Turkey at the center of three sea basins and three lands draws geo-economic and geo-cultural power as well" (Outzen int 2021). Similar to Lisel Hintz's argument about national identity contestation and foreign policy in Turkey and "Ottoman Islamism Inside Out" (Hintz 2018), he echoes the view that "Davutoğlu's narrative presented a vision in cultural, civilizational terms, but also of a power and an order-setter" (Ifantis int 2021). Under Davutoğlu's guidance till 2016, successive AKP governments transformed Turkish strategic priorities to support an axis shift toward the Arab Middle East. Some critics such as Ünal see this shift from a negative angle: With the rise of identity politics and transformative forces shaking established Middle Eastern powers, "nation-state was an anathema in the new world order," says Ünal, "The message to Turkey was clear: you cannot sustain the nation-state model. The US-EU jointly put pressure to transform Turkey and Davutoğlu derived neo-Ottomanism out of this new equation... But his peculiar thinking ran counter to the fact that all former Ottoman provinces in the Balkans and the Middle East have emerged as independent nation-states, and none of them yearned for a new Ottoman world" (Ünal int 2021).

The analytical framework in Figure 21 below summarizes the AKP's foreign policy consensus and outcomes in the period between 2004 and 2010. As the figure indicates, based on a more permissive strategic environment and low clarity of threats, the rise of moderate Islam and the adoption of Washington Consensus measures under the IMF's economic orthodoxy became the hallmarks of this period in the domestic arena. To put into perspective, from the 1990s onwards, neoliberal policies had opened Turkey to intensive cross-border movement of goods, services, and capital supported by the corner-stone Customs Union agreement in 1995 with the EU. The AKP

continued these economic reforms through deregulation, liberalization, and privatization policies, and supported Turkey’s EU membership process to soften the effects of secular state policies (i.e., the military) on the government. As a logrolled coalition of a wide range of political factions including Gülenists,⁷⁰ the AKP based its policies on pragmatic-moderate Islamism and achieved many of its objectives until 2010 despite the military elite’s initial refusal to submit to a popular mandate that would overturn Atatürk’s secular legacy.

Figure 21: Turkey’s Foreign Policy, 2004–2010



This “golden age,” as it is often referred to, was underpinned by steps to instigate substantial democratic and liberal packages in economic progress, judiciary, civil-military relations, and minority rights, thus raising the AKP’s popularity among its constituents in parallel with hopes about Turkey’s membership prospects to the EU. However, critics like Ünal point to the identity politics behind it: “Living on the illusion that Turkey would one day join the EU, Islamists-liberals embarked on a mission to re-structure the state and hoped to use it as a lever to transform Turkey

⁷⁰ Corruption and severe economic dislocation in the 1990s and 2000-2001 contributed to radicalization and extremism of certain marginal Islamist groups under the AKP’s umbrella.

to a federated entity with significant autonomy for the Kurds” (Ünal int 2021). For him, it was a project to depose the unitary nation-state and replace it with a de-centralized, weaker model. Other critics argue that the alternative strategic culture was a reaction to the military elite’s exclusion of Islam from civil society. Their strict adherence to a historicist, reductionist interpretation of Kemalism in the 1990s caused self-described moderns of the Turkish republicans to eschew pragmatism, decentralization, and pluralism as politico-cultural resources from early on, the aggregate effect of which was “Islam’s reverberation effect” (Seleny 2006, 485). As the AKP aggregated multiple political factions from Islamists like Bülent Arınç to former-leftist liberals like Mehmet Altan and emphasized the primacy of economics over security, Ünal and Tansi argue that it became an underwriter of the Western-led neoliberal world order (Tansi int 2021; Ünal int 2021). Hence, İşeri argues, “Turkey shifted from its traditional paradigm of a highly securitized foreign policy to a new paradigm of de-securitization that used instruments of extended diplomacy and economics during the 2000s” (İşeri 2019, 261). This gradual change in external threat perception prompted Ankara to take concrete steps toward reconciliation with Greece and the RoC in 2004. The next section discusses how the alternative strategic culture based on the “zero problems with neighbors” concept moderated AKP’s foreign policy toward the EU and why it led to disappointment among the military establishment that reacted with its own policy proposal of Blue Homeland.

1.2. Rapprochement with Greece and the RoC in the Context of Turkey-EU Relations

From 2002 onwards, Turkey adopted harmonization packages and liberal democratic norms in accordance with the EU roadmap, which had positive effects on EU-Turkey relations. Turkey made major strides during both coalition governments of the 90s and the AKP’s reign in 2000s to meet the Copenhagen Criteria on the rule of law and primacy of human rights, and Maastricht

Criteria on economic convergence indicators to join the Euro Zone. Without fulfilling the political criteria, however, it was impossible to make progress. One of the requirements was to improve relations with neighbors, which basically meant Greece (and later, the RoC) as the EU did not want to have borders with problematic regions. Therefore, settlement of disputes with Greece/Cyprus became a prerequisite for Turkey to join the EU. Since Greece blocked Turkey's progress on its membership talks with the EU, the AKP government tried to normalize relations with Greece/Cyprus in the early 2000s. From an outside-in perspective, "What Davutoğlu termed as 'zero problems with neighbors' was an attempt to meet the EU criteria and overcome Greek vetoes" (Ünver Noi int 2021). Indeed, Greek Cypriots demonstrated unprecedented flexibility toward a solution on the island to join the EU, and Turkey just reciprocated their approach to a solution perspective (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). Internally, "some people floated the idea that the 'deep state in Ankara' held Cyprus Issue in limbo as a legitimization strategy for its own interests" (Ünal int 2021) and the AKP wanted to loosen that grip. "Cyprus was a 'taboo' in Turkey until 2004," says Ünlühisarcıklı, "the dominant narrative embraced by all political parties and the state bureaucracy was '*Kıbrıs namustur, verilemez*' (Cyprus is honor, it may not be foregone)" (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). Many people viewed the UN-mediated talks on Cyprus as Turkey's undue concession on an important issue and harshly reacted to it. The AKP set on a mission to change that narrative and use it as a political leverage against the Kemalist establishment at home. So, it was a combination of domestic (inside-out) and structural (outside-in) factors that led to Turkey's approval to vote the Annan Plan for a political settlement to the division in Cyprus.

In the AKP's early years, Turkey's Mediterranean policy consisted mainly of the Cyprus Question; the "Toward Blue Waters" strategy had not yet materialized. In this context, between 2003 and 2004, a window of opportunity appeared to reconcile both sides' claims over maritime

boundaries also in the Aegean Sea. Turkey and Greece came very close to reaching an agreement through exploratory talks and sketching a partition of the Aegean CS by referring the case to the ICJ⁷¹ as part of Ankara's roadmap for accession to the EU.⁷² However, Greece refused to refer the case. "There are seldom opportunities, and 2004 was one of them, both for Cyprus and the Aegean," says Grigoriadis, "...there was a high degree of optimism and the constellation of powers on both sides was very positive at that time. Kostas Simitis (Prime Minister) and George Papandreou (Foreign Minister) in Greece worked a lot on this and believed in this, but in my personal view, the Karamanlis government behaved irresponsibly [and dropped the plan]" (Grigoriadis int 2021). Not long after, another opportunity would knock on Greece's door to settle the Cyprus Problem peacefully with Turkey, and that was the Annan Plan referendum in 2004, which again failed to pass through. "Just like they let down the Aegean issue, the Karamanlis government let the Annan Plan sink... they let the key Greek Cypriot actor (Papadopoulos) set the agenda, dominate the discourse, and victimize himself," adds Grigoriadis (Grigoriadis int 2021). Also, "Greek Cypriots expected Turkey to surrender to the EU and Turkish Cypriots to join the Greek side just like East Germany joined the West in 1989" (Ünal int 2021).

To elaborate on the "Annan Plan," the then-UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan – a liberal advocate of multilateralism, global commercial interests, and economic integration – offered, prior to the EU accession, a mutually attractive bargain to both communities in Cyprus to reunite under a new constitutional order. One of the reasons behind the initiative was the EU's priority to reduce its long-term energy dependence on Russia. With its core interest "to take concerted action on

⁷¹ Greece had not put a reservation to the ICJ's jurisdiction by 2003, yet.

⁷² Details of this scheme leaked to the Greek press and caused an outcry in Turkey. It seemed that Ankara had allegedly accepted varying widths of 8-to-10 and even 12 -mile territorial waters for Greece in certain parts of the Aegean. Gürdeniz wrote "once again, thank God that Greeks refused this plan, just like they did the Annan plan. Otherwise, we would face an irrecoverable geopolitical loss" (Gürdeniz 2021c).

energy security and to have a comprehensive policy on offshore drilling” (Çubukçuoğlu 2014a), the EU considered Cyprus as a key outpost to guard its energy interests in an unstable region. Turkey supported the reunification plan partly in the hope to become an energy hub as the preferred export route for natural gas to Europe and to advance its EU accession talks. However, when Greek Cypriots rejected Annan’s plan and hitherto joined the EU just a week later in 2004, Turkey’s interest in the EU project started to lose momentum. Hugh Pope and Nigar Göksel opine that “if Europe is looking for a moment when it ‘lost’ Turkey, a little recognized turning point was the EU’s acceptance of the RoC as a member in 2004” (Pope and Goksel 2020). The Greek part’s unilateral accession just one week after the referendum, plus the official signing of a maritime delimitation agreement with Egypt, and subsequent declaration of the Cypriot EEZ had a powerful impact on the Turkish psyche, adding insult to injury. “This was a turning point,” says Ülgen, “essentially, Turkish side presented a positive, constructive attitude in negotiations but turned back empty-handed” (Ülgen int 2021). “Had the plan got accepted,” says Ünver Noi, “we wouldn’t have had Blue Homeland issues with neighbors in such a tense atmosphere today” (Ünver Noi int 2021).

The consequent political fall-out after the failures from 2003 to 2004 and disillusionment with the stagnant accession process have handicapped Turkey’s EU-membership negotiations ever since and led to the political elite’s eventual embrace of a hard-line approach toward Greece and the RoC. As a sense of betrayal settled in Turkey, “the public opinion gradually turned against the EU” (Batur 2021, 21). From another perspective, the Greek Cypriot part’s defection in the classical prisoner’s dilemma and subsequent reward of EU membership, in contrast to the Turkish Cypriot part’s cooperation and perceived punishment, exposed deficiencies in the rules-based international system for a fair settlement of the Cyprus Problem. Sir Peter Westmacott, a former British ambassador to Ankara, observes that the accession of Cyprus to the EU as a *de facto* divided island

“linked progress on Turkey’s membership with Greek Cypriot approval and crippled future initiatives to regress the issue” (Westmacott 2021). Many experts like Çağaptay agree that Cyprus is the main bottleneck blocking progress on everything else. “Like it or not, Cyprus pops up on every bilateral political negotiation between Greece and Turkey; it’s impossible to turn a blind eye to the elephant in the room and move on with other issues in a peaceful manner,” adds a former Turkish diplomat (FTD int 2021).

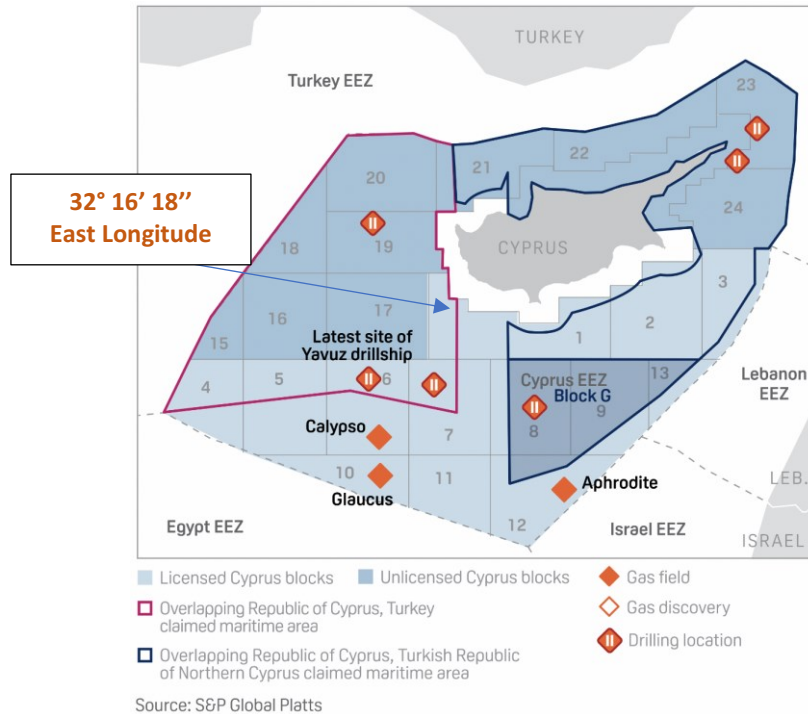
In the wider scheme, the foregone opportunity hindered Turkey’s convergence with the European project and its orientation toward harmony of interests with the West. “If Turkey had stayed on track for EU membership, we could get another opportunity like 2004, but what to do now,” says Grigoriadis, pointing to the AKP’s defiance of the EU norms since 2016. At the Brussels Summit in December 2004, the EU officially granted candidate status to Turkey to start accession negotiations on the *Community acqui* in 2005, but this was a token reward with no practical meaning as the RoC would then block every attempt to bring Turkey closer to Europe. The EU also dropped its earlier promise to assist Turkish Cypriots on trade with Europe when Greek Cypriots joined the club and activated their veto power. Taking disappointment in Turkey toward a fair resolution in Cyprus as the basis, the next section explores why the navy perceived a more conflictual strategic environment and proposed Blue Homeland as an alternative policy against reconciliation with the EU.

1.3. Maritime Zones around Cyprus, the Seville Map, and the Emergence of Blue Homeland

The immediate strategic impact of Cyprus’s membership to the EU as a *de facto* divided island manifested in the maritime domain. Before the Annan Plan, the RoC delimited its maritime boundary with Egypt in 2003 and declared an EEZ in 2004 with effect from March 21, 2003. This was a year after Turkey blocked the “Northern Access” seismic research vessel off the island’s

western coast. The Greek Cypriot government passed a law in 2004 defining and regulating its EEZ, in which there are thirteen sub-zones or “blocks” that can be auctioned for concession agreements to energy companies. However, not only do Turkish Cypriots claim equal rights to the island’s resources, but the Greek Cypriot EEZ also overlaps the area Turkey claims as its EEZ in five of the thirteen offshore research blocks (1, 4, 5, 6, and 7) on the island’s west and southwest. Turkey submitted a note to the UN Secretary-General on March 2, 2004, that it has exclusive rights on the continental shelf and economic zones in the area to the west of 32° 16’ 18’’ East Longitude (Figure 22 below).

Figure 22: Cyprus EEZ Disputes and Energy Deposits



Source: S&P Global Platts, 2020

The existing stand-off over energy rights, therefore, exacerbated the political conflict over sovereignty and representation on the island and turned it into a multilateral issue with many moving dimensions. Apakan says, “we took the initiative with the Turkish navy. This was in response to RoC’s unilateral EEZ demarcation, even before publication of the Seville Map and

Blue Homeland’s emergence” (Apakan int 2021). When asked about why Turkey did not extend its maritime border to Libya then and wait till 2019, he replied “we were focused on Cyprus negotiations (Annan Plan) and did not prefer to enter a new stand-off with Greece” (Apakan int 2021). In other words, to avoid derailing the EU accession process, although Turkey took the initiative to defend its CS in the Mediterranean, it kept a lower profile than the RoC and did not sign an EEZ agreement with any country in the region. This was an important signal to the RoC that Turkey did not want to escalate tensions through aggressive policies but also would not allow unilateral demarcation of maritime zones without due consultation.

Following these initial tit-for-tat moves, the EU Commission’s approach to maritime boundaries in 2006 added a much-debated academic dimension to the equitable share of maritime zones in the Mediterranean. Juan Luis Suárez de Vivro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez Mateos from the University of Seville’s Department of Geography published an article titled “Maritime Europe and EU Enlargement: A Geopolitical Perspective” in 2006 to explore “whether the new maritime Europe constitutes an opportunity, or does it aggravate the already-existing problems and threats?” (de Vivero and Rodríguez Mateos 2006). The article displayed a map of the outer boundaries of the EU’s EEZ, grouped by country, that since then gained a grossly magnified significance much beyond its initial meaning. Referred to as “The Seville Map,” as shown in Figure 23 below, the work’s objective was to conduct maritime spatial planning in preparation for the EU’s enlargement in 2007. The EU had ratified UNCLOS in 1998 and assigned it as part of *acqui* for candidate countries to apply during accession talks.⁷³ The plan was to promote effective implementation of the provisions of UNCLOS for the EU Energy Roadmap 2050 and for “straddling and highly migratory fish stocks” (Chasek, Downie, and Brown 2014, 208–9). The roadmap also stresses the

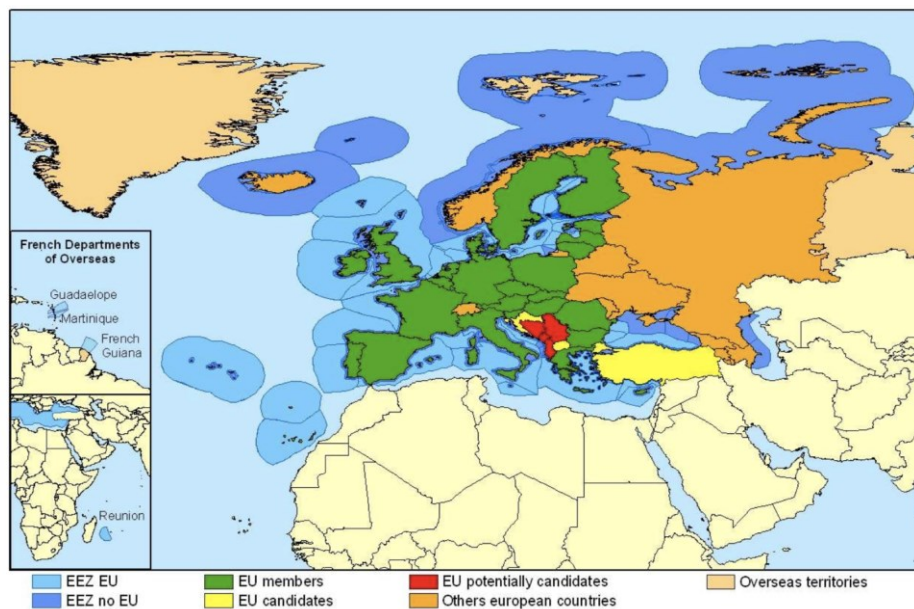
⁷³ This is another stumbling block in Turkey-EU relations. Turkey refuses to sign and ratify UNCLOS, at least not until the maritime disputes with Greece and the RoC are resolved in a peaceful and equitable manner.

need for concerted action on energy security and a comprehensive policy on offshore drilling (Paipais 2013), which may lead in the long run to a common European EEZ. The latter part on fisheries is consistent with the EU's goal to extend the coverage of distant-water fishing fleets to lucrative waters of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, because highly migratory fish stocks, "especially tuna and swordfish, move along long distances, passing through EEZs of multiple states each year" (Chasek, Downie, and Brown 2014). Moreover, the development of fisheries and aquaculture reflects the EU's desired dietary shift away from emission-intensive land-based protein sources toward low carbon ocean-based protein sources, which is also of economic importance for Turkey. Kutluk highlights that "there is blue-fin tuna hunting in waters between Turkey and Cyprus, which is as precious as oil and worth fighting for. Turkey's quota for tuna last year (2020) was 2,305 tons, and 1 ton is worth 50,000 Euros. Turkey earns 120 million Euros per year from this business" (Kutluk int 2021).

Altogether, the significance of the Seville Map for Turkey lies in its apparent disregard for potential Turkish EEZs in the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. "The Seville Map and Greek claims are maximalists and frankly absurd," says Aaron Stein, "Any legal expert would tell you that the final map, if they were to do this by the letter of the law, would probably look closer to *Mavi Vatan* than it would to the Seville Map" (Stein 2021b). There was (and still is) an expectation in Turkey that "littorals would have a multilateral agreement to equitably divide the semi-closed Eastern Mediterranean into national jurisdiction zones before exploitation" (Karan int 2021). The proposed Seville Map forms a contiguous EU EEZ extending from Spain to Cyprus, recognizing Greek and Greek Cypriot maximalist claims to the detriment of Turkey. This map appeared in another publication by the same authors in 2007 titled "Atlas of the European Seas and Oceans" (Juan L Suárez de Vivero and Rodríguez Mateos 2007), a project supported and funded by the EU

and the Spanish National Research Centre. The authors re-endorsed the Seville Map in their third and final report for the EU Parliament in 2009 titled “Jurisdictional Waters in the Mediterranean and Black Seas,” but this time put a reservation on the map so that it shows “theoretical boundaries” (Juan Luis Suárez de Vivero, European Parliament, and Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union 2009).

Figure 23: The Seville Map



Source: Juan Luis Suárez de Vivero, Juan Carlos Rodríguez Mateos, Spain, 2007

The progenitors of Blue Homeland attribute more meaning to the map than its substance, but it still deserves attention. Despite its pervasive use across various EU fora such as the FRONTEX (European Border and Coast Guard Agency), the union’s official line does not regard the Seville Map as a legally binding document for maritime jurisdiction. This position is echoed by the US State Department, which regards the map as merely a scientific study: “maritime boundaries are for the states concerned to resolve by agreement on the basis of international law” (U.S. Embassy Turkey 2020). However, based on this map, the Greek Cypriot government proposed in 2013 an alternative East Med pipeline to export gas to Europe via Greece with assistance from the EU, a stimulus that fundamentally changed Turkey’s calculus about energy security and the regional

balance of power ever since. The center of gravity in Turkish-Greek frictions has shifted from the Aegean Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean to tackle the rising challenges in/around Cyprus (Heraclides int 2021).

As an outcome of frictions over sovereignty around Cyprus, unsurprisingly, at the end of 2006, the EU took the dramatic step of suspending talks on key aspects of Ankara's application for membership. The European Council decided that "no chapter could be closed with Turkey until it extended the terms of the Additional Protocol to [the Republic of] Cyprus," effectively limiting Turkey's progress until a solution to the Cyprus problem is found (Hoffman and Werz 2020, 17). A recent joint report by the Center for American Progress and Stiftung-Mercator affirms that "many EU Member States no doubt welcomed the political cover the Cyprus issue provided, not wanting to admit that, in fact, there was never European consensus in support of Turkey's accession" (Hoffman and Werz 2020, 17–18). Adding a personal anecdote, Ünal says, "German diplomats in Ankara acknowledged in private that Turkey would never become part of the EU, so this is not me daydreaming" (Ünal int 2021). Therefore, "Turkey's vocation to join the EU became a lost cause in mid-2000s" (Outzen int 2021), long before the AKP's democratic backsliding in the domestic arena gained momentum in 2010.

With the absence of a negotiated settlement in Cyprus, the rhetoric in Turkey shifted from accommodation of European standards to the repudiation of the perceived injustice and inequity by the EU. As Ülgen notes, "the AKP's policy at that time was 'to be one step ahead'. Upon failure of the Annan Plan, they could not recoup their political investment and gave a cold shoulder to the EU, arguing that 'these Europeans are unfair'" (Ülgen int 2021). This fragile relationship between Turkey and the EU anyhow hung by a thin thread and all it needed to let loose was a systemic stimulus, which was the RoC's EU membership and access to offshore energy deposits. From

Turkey's point of view, the AKP's reformist journey lasted only a few years and ended with a disappointment toward the EU. Indeed, since the AKP's roots are in the anti-Western *Millî Görüş* tradition set by Necmettin Erbakan in the 1960s, despite the initial aspiration toward EU membership, its Eurosceptic background limited prospects for this endeavor. Consequently, Greek Cypriots found a permissive environment to pursue their agenda of expanding maritime jurisdictions, while Turkey began to face an increasingly more restricted strategic situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. As Turkey's anxiety over the maritime zones heightened and its EU membership prospect dwindled, Ankara resorted to what Carr posits as "countries which are struggling to force their way into the dominant group naturally tend to invoke nationalism against the internationalism of the controlling powers" (Carr 1964, 79). Hence, "a lot of the reasons why Turkey has become strategically more independent, more of a multipolar balancing role actor, are not about the US at all but the EU" (Outzen int 2021). The combined effect of resentment toward the AKP's soft stance at home, exclusion from energy projects, and pressures from the EU gave rise to an updated maritime concept in the navy.

Turkey's *Mavi Vatan* maritime policy was born in 2006 on the backdrop of these shifts in the geopolitical landscape and the quest for energy security. Under the "Toward Blue Waters" strategy and the former Chief Admiral (Ret.) Özden Örnek's guidance, the Turkish navy had launched major in-house modernization projects between 2003–2005 such as ARMERKOM (R&D Center), MİLGEM (National Corvette), GENESIS (Combat Management System), LONG HORIZON (Long-Range Radar Coverage and Situational Awareness in the Aegean/Mediterranean). The navy launched "Operation Mediterranean Shield" in 2006 under NATO's auspices to protect the Bakü-Tiflis-Ceyhan oil pipeline on the Mediterranean port of İskenderun and to guard Turkish/Turkish Cypriot prospective EEZs against Greek Cypriot claims. Gürdeniz mentions the first, unofficial

circulation of the Seville Map in 2004 when he served as the Head of Strategic Planning and Policy in the Turkish navy as a stimulus for awakening the naval community (Gürdeniz 2020f). He adds, “there was a campaign in the government, media, and academic circles against our national interests in the name of ‘joining the EU’... Turkey could not accept to abide by the Seville Map; the contrary would equate to an irreversible geopolitical downfall. Nor could we approve expansion of NATO’s ‘Active Endeavor Operation’ to Black Sea that would disturb the Montreux regime. *Mavi Vatan* emerged as a manifesto on top of ‘Operation Black Sea Harmony’ and ‘Operation Mediterranean Shield’ (TN-3 int 2021) to prevent Greek Cypriot *fait accomplis* in maritime demarcation and exploitation. It was an extension of Atatürk’s directive on September 1, 1922, after the Great Victory toward the Mediterranean” (Gürdeniz int 2021b).

On that last point about Atatürk, such reference to the early republican period is a conscious choice by Gürdeniz. Gingeras observes: “many of those individuals who have helped promote *Mavi Vatan* have utilized Kemalism to make their case. It wasn’t that Gürdeniz just came up with it. The difference is this idea of an all-unifying theory of Turkish maritime strategy” (Gingeras int 2021). More broadly, the navy felt obliged to draw attention to Turkey’s maritime rights and interests, and “designed Blue Homeland to alert politicians to remedy the situation [in the Mediterranean]” (Kıyat int 2021). Progenitors of Blue Homeland highlight that they “do not harbor hegemonic ambitions to dominate the region but present a roadmap to secure Turkey’s maritime periphery” and to prevent the rise of a rival coalition with superior capabilities that might attempt to alter the status-quo to Turkey’s detriment (Gürdeniz int 2021b; Sağdıç int 2021; Kutluk int 2021). From a realist perspective, this quest for survival in the anarchic system of international politics through defensive measures entails security reassurance rather than power maximization.

The phrase *Mavi Vatan* thereby entered the literature as a naval strategy in 2006 at a presentation session by Gürdeniz during a military seminar in Ankara. Karan says, “around about the time Gürdeniz first coined the term *Mavi Vatan*, there was already a consensus in the navy for a doctrinal shift [following in the footsteps of “Toward Blue Waters”], still unnamed until then. Before, Turkey did not have a coordinated state policy toward maritime zones; it was fragmented and circumstantial” (Karan int 2021). Gürdeniz has gained the credit for promoting the country’s maritime interests and geopolitical significance portending from the mainland to the periphery with this powerful phrase. Tziarras opines, “the thinking was there even before natural gas and EEZs; *Millî Görüş* parties, and by extension the AKP, wanted to do this. It was a matter of when and how to do it, and to legitimize it” (Tziarras int 2021). Critically, however, *Millî Görüş* would not have masterminded a maritime policy with roots in Kemalism, plus the AKP despised the military establishment even before 2002. So, Tziarras’ argument about the AKP’s contribution to Blue Homeland needs further evidence, which does not render itself readily. The fact that the AKP instrumentalized Blue Homeland after 2016 does not imply that it supported or even endorsed its emergence in 2006. On the contrary, the AKP covered over the concept and kept it in check until such time in 2013 when Erdoğan fell out with and set off a campaign against the Gülenists. This aspect is further discussed in the later sections.

There were three consequential contributing factors behind the Blue Homeland policy: First, the Annan Plan disturbed the defense establishment, the nationalist-Kemalist bureaucracy in Ankara, and “some people viewed it as Turkey’s resignation from a vital national dossier and reacted to it behind the doors” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). Second, “we can say that anxieties about and awareness about Cyprus’ geostrategic position in the military’s mindset set the stage for emergence of the Blue Homeland concept” (Aydın-Düzgüt int 2021); and third, “Turkey was a key

player on the East-West energy corridor, but then it became regionally isolated from [gas] monetization projects. The energy alliance of the opposite camp [i.e., Greece-RoC] left Turkey out, and Blue Homeland came as a pre-emptive response against this isolation” (TBE int 2021). In essence, the concept takes Kemalist strategic tradition of the 1990s a step further by refusing the Seville Map and withdrawal of Turkish troops from North Cyprus. In comparison to Davutoğlu’s doctrine, “both the Strategic Depth and Blue Homeland are explicitly geopolitical” (Outzen int 2021), but the former had a larger role in the Turkish foreign policy until 2016 whereas the latter ascended afterwards. However, some of the interview respondents believe that Turkey’s hard-power response via Blue Homeland was only one of the many available policy options. Danforth says, “There was a lot of sympathy for Turkey and Turkish Cypriots in Washington on Cyprus issue after the Annan Plan and even the last round of talks in Crans-Montana (2017). Not many people in Turkey thought that this sympathy would get them any tangible benefits though. In situations where there wasn’t so much animosity toward Turkish foreign policy writ large, and there wasn’t this sometimes very personalized hostility toward Erdoğan [as in 2004-2010], Ankara could have capitalized on the sympathy over repeated failure of Cyprus talks to advance its interest there” (Danforth int 2021; TBE int 2021). Put differently, Blue Homeland was only one way to assert Turkey’s maritime rights, but it became the dominant one after 2016, for reasons to be elaborated in section 3.

1.4. Trade Expansion, Economic Power, and Naval Strategy under the AKP’s First Decade

The purpose of this section is to explore the AKP’s foreign policy and the development of the Turkish naval strategy between 2006 and 2010. At the outset, Blue Homeland was a concept within the confines of the military realm both in terms of symbolism and substance. However, it would be unfair to say that the AKP’s soft-power diplomacy approach completely overlooked maritime

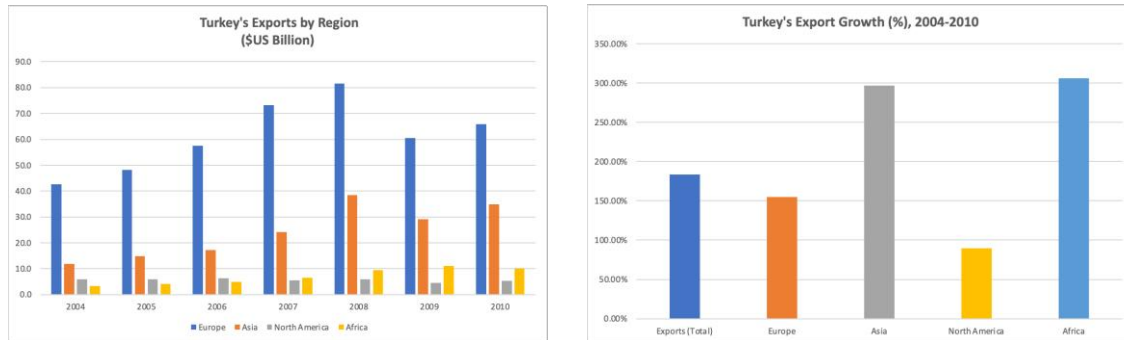
defense. The navy's designated role within the AKP's "zero problems with neighbors" policy consisted of a Mahan-style strategy to protect maritime commerce routes, potential energy deposits, and logistical supply facilities. The navy continued its strategic expansion from 2007 to 2010, commissioned new platforms, set sail in the Indian Ocean, and participated in Counter-Piracy Task Force (CTF) missions in the Gulf/Arabian Sea, but the Blue Homeland concept stayed out of bounds to the political realm until 2013–2014. Despite the activism between the 1970s and 1990s, the navy had limited functionality at the top level within Turkey's grand strategy if there ever was such a strategy. That situation began to change from 2006 onwards. "Turkey had a somewhat activist foreign policy even back in the 90s but not as loud and intense as in the AKP era," says a business expert (TBE int 2021), and naval diplomacy became an instrument of the AKP's strategic outreach.

With the army's incumbent position in perspective, there were two practical reasons for the navy to take a greater role during the AKP's first decade: expanding trade partnerships and scrambling for energy resources. First, most of the Turkey's foreign trade (>80%) is conducted overseas and requires maritime security. An economic boom between 2002 to 2010 boosted Turkey's trade links and political ties abroad and created a sphere of influence in the region, especially in the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans. The MFA has opened embassies in even the farthest corners of Africa that acted practically as trade representative offices.⁷⁴ With no colonial past and imperial ambitions toward Sub-Saharan Africa, local people embraced Turkey's entry into the region. Cultural diplomacy and humanitarian aid missions thrived in that environment. Although Europe remained Turkey's largest export destination, Figure 24 below shows that Asia (inc. Middle East) and Africa (inc. North Africa) received a larger share of the

⁷⁴ In just fifteen years, Turkey increased the number of embassies in the African continent from 12 to 42 (Anatolia News Agency 2019).

total exports that grew by over 300% in just six years. The AKP enjoyed “unprecedented prosperity and influence, thanks to Turkey’s slow but growing integration into global markets” (Karaveli 2016, 121–30). “For the first time in recent memory, Turkey grew strongly compared to its neighbors, even during and after the 2008 financial crisis” (Çağaptay 2021).

Figure 24: Turkish Exports by Region, Turkish Export Growth by Region, 2004–2010

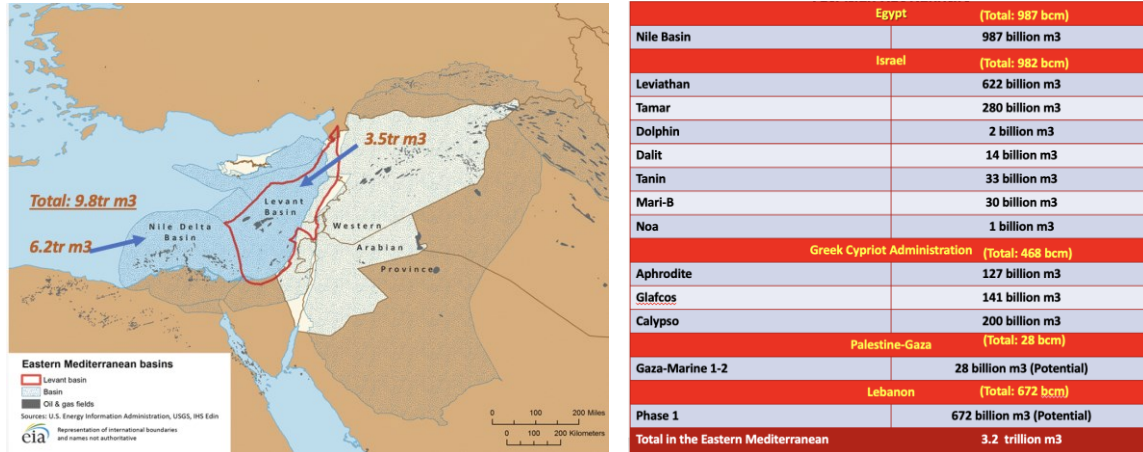


Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), MIT, 2004-2010

The challenge was that this opening to emerging markets of the East coincided with the deteriorating relations with the West. Turkey has traditionally been a capital-scarce, labor-intensive country that has faced declining terms of trade for agriculture; its relatively infant industries could not compete with European manufactured goods within the EU Customs Union since 1995. Immanuel Wallerstein’s version of the dependency theory explains how “Turkey came to occupy a subservient place on the periphery of a capitalist world system” in the late Ottoman era (Zürcher 2004, 6), which continued into the republican era. Based on *Millî Görüş’s* principles of independence from the West, fair returns to labor capital, and import-substitution, the AKP tried to break free of this unequal exchange between the industrial core and the agrarian periphery. Gradually, Turkey re-positioned itself as an alternative industrial hub for the labour-intensive emerging markets of the Middle East and Africa to improve its terms of trade. From a wider angle, İpek observes that “there is continuity in Turkey’s reactions to systemic stimuli: Similar to the 1974 Cyprus Operation during the Watergate scandal [and unrest in the US], Turkey took

economic advantage of the turmoil in the aftermath of the 2008-9 financial crisis when the West was off-balance, and expanded its presence into new markets” (İpek int 2021).

Figure 25: East Med Gas Potential and East Med Gas Discoveries since 2009



Sources: USGC (2013), Necdet Pamir (2016), Serhat S. Çubukçuoğlu (2020), Charles Ellinas (2022)

Apart from trade expansion, the quest for access to energy sources in the Mediterranean acted as another systemic stimulus for Turkey. The Discovery of 9.5 trillion m³ offshore energy potential from 2009 onwards (Figure 25 above) and its diplomatic consequences on Turkey-EU relations added another dimension to the regional security mix. Advancements in deep-sea drilling technologies and shale fracking since the late 1990s enabled access to oil/gas deposits at even 10,000 meters below the sea surface. The USGS estimated that just the Levant basin alone houses 1.7 billion barrels of oil, 3,5 trillion m³ of natural gas, and just as more gas hydrates according to more realistic recent findings that could meet the regional demand and be available for export to the outside world for 20-25 years (U.S. EIA 2013). As Turkey’s gas consumption grew by 50% between 2004 and 2010 (Figure 26 below) and increased the burden on the budget, it searched for avenues to reduce import dependence and secure supply from alternative sources other than Russia and Iran.

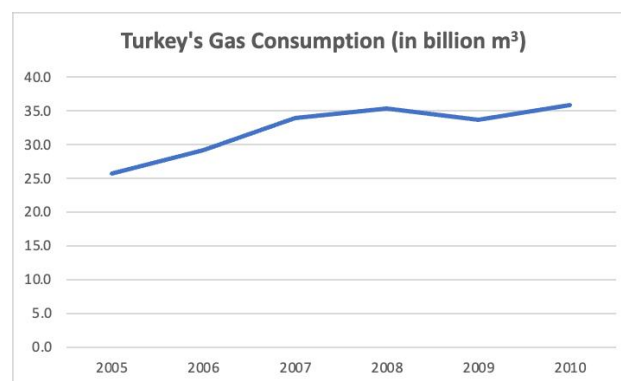
Overall, as Turkey’s population grew, trade ties expanded, and the economy developed, its relative power increased, and it started to seek a larger regional role to match its higher profile.

When asked “why the navy took prominence more recently [since mid-2000s],” Outzen says “Turkey’s articulation of its national interests became broader in geographic scope; ten years ago, way before the *Mavi Vatan* deal with Libya [in 2019], the navy became the most tangible manifestation of Turkish diplomatic extension” (Outzen int 2021). This means the navy’s mission was no longer just military power projection but also economic and diplomatic power projection. “For projection of power short of conflict, the navy is a more useful tool than an army brigade of soldiers” (Outzen int 2021). Compared to conventional land operations, naval operations are more manageable in the sense that “they are less prone to disastrous escalation and also typically more cost-effective” (Şafak Polat 2022, 330). As Turkey’s power projection expanded in scope, the interest deficit between its material capabilities and acknowledged role in the system began to create tensions with the EU/Greece-Cyprus and Israel, which the country tried to bridge by acting more assertively in maritime domains. That, in turn, required a larger capacity for its armed forces, the most important component of which is the ability to do power projection and the navy by extension. Per the “Toward Blue Waters” strategy, the navy’s area of interest has grown beyond the NATO/Cold War parameters; it consisted of not just defense of littoral waters in the Black Sea but naval diplomacy, exercises, and escorting missions in faraway places. As opposed to the 1980s-90s with limited requirements to deploy forces, the navy has since then “occupied a larger seat in Turkey’s defense architecture” (Mevlütöğlü int 2021). Traditional Turkish-Greek maritime disputes continued to occupy a major part of the defense strategy, but the navy’s mission statement has outgrown that old paradigm.

Due to these emerging areas of growth, Turkey’s politico-economic tensions with maritime dimensions manifested in two theaters: Cyprus and Israel, and by extension Greece and the EU. The RoC signed an EEZ delimitation agreement with Lebanon in 2007 and granted a concession

to the Houston-based Noble Energy in 2008 in its block 12 to explore for gas in a production-sharing agreement. Normally, the RoC is obliged under UNCLOS to “cease conflictual practices such as gas drilling that would further distort the *status quo ante* and refrain from activities that would prejudice a solution to the division of the island in the future” (Karan int 2021), but it did not cease these activities. Between 2004 and 2010, despite Turkey/Turkish Cypriot objections, the RoC unabatedly continued its unilateral quest for EEZs and maritime exploitation. In parallel, and as opposed to the AKP’s re-commitment to overhaul Turkey’s brand image as a peace promoter and to abide by the EU’s *acqui* in 2007, the navy adopted an activist posture to demarcate maritime zones of interest in the Mediterranean and often became the subject of open criticism in EU progress reports. The 2009 report in particular accused the Turkish navy of harassment of “civilian vessels prospecting for oil on behalf of the Republic of Cyprus” (EU Commission 2009). This was shortly after the navy deployed its first homemade corvette, *TCG Heybeliada*, with 70% local input and planned to expand an ambitious program to upgrade the fleet. By 2009, it had progressed through an energetic modernization plan consisting of local-design corvettes, anti-ship missiles, combat management systems, and advanced reconnaissance platforms.

Figure 26: Turkey’s Natural Gas Consumption, 2005-2010



Source: Statista, 2021

While the EU criticized Ankara and advised respect toward the RoC, the Turkish MFA defied the calls and insisted to act as a persistent objector to the Greek Cypriot unilateral claims to energy

rights. Turkey made a series of declarations via formal notes to the UN General Secretariat in 2004, 2005, 2007, 2011, and 2013 to designate the outer boundaries of its CS/EEZ in the Mediterranean. Step by step, these statements extended Turkey’s potential EEZ to the west, which culminated in the MoU with Libya on November 27, 2019. Apakan says, “when I was the Undersecretary of the MFA, we collaborated with the navy for one year in 2007-8 to plan our maritime zones and to designate blocks around Cyprus for licensing to TPAO. Together, we made a proposal to the government [AKP] to buy offshore drilling vessels” (Apakan int 2021). For the first time, Turkey dispatched a Norwegian-flag seismic research vessel named *Malene Ostervold* on November 13, 2008, for exploration on 38-to-128 miles south of the Greek island of Kastellorizo (Gürdeniz int 2021b; Apakan int 2021) despite protest from Athens. Also, the navy intervened and turned back “14 research vessels operating on behalf of the RoC between 2004 and 2016” (Yaycı 2020a, 141). The only exception to these tit-for-tat moves was the period of 2009–2010 when there were no incidents in the Aegean and the Mediterranean. Filis praises Turkey’s magnanimity of the time by saying, “I give Erdoğan credit that he didn’t take advantage of Greece’s dire economic crisis when we entered in memoranda with the IMF. Turkey did not take advantage of that... Erdoğan was considered a moderate figure back then” (Filis int 2021).

These responses demonstrate that under an increasingly restrictive strategic environment and higher clarity of threats, the AKP could not sustain a peace-at-all-costs policy for very long. At some point, it would have to adopt an assertive approach one way or the other if it wanted to avoid loss of prestige among nationalists at home, which represent a substantial portion of the Turkish electorate.⁷⁵ However, Turkey was still in a reactive mode. Yaycı had published a scholarly article about Turkey-Libya maritime boundary in 2011 (Yaycı 2011) but it took the AKP another full

⁷⁵ According to opinion polls, 90% of Turkish people identify themselves as “patriots”. On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), the average electorate in Turkey ranks 7 in terms of nationalism (Ağirdir 2018).

eight years to act on it. Arab Uprisings and Kaddafi's downfall were systemic factors that caused the delay, but Turkey consciously did not push for maritime delimitation with Egypt or Libya in early-to-mid 2000s; it maintained the status quo. It did not present a complete map depicting its CS/EEZ boundaries for the Mediterranean until 2019. When asked about why Ankara moved late, Tziarras says, "They couldn't do it. Domestically speaking they couldn't take the decision, there were domestic constraints against taking such risky decisions that would challenge Turkey's relations with the EU/West" (Tziarras int 2021). Before discussing these domestic challenges that inhibited maritime activism, the next section discusses how the RoC and Greece received a stimulus to advance their maritime claims after the AKP's political fallout with Israel between 2009 and 2010.

1.5. The "One Minute" Incident, the Mavi Marmara Incident, and the Break-up with Israel

The trajectory of Israeli-Turkish relations is an important part of the change in the regional threat landscape and a test case for Turkey's resolve against a powerful coalition with competing maritime claims. This section explores the significance of this relationship as a causal factor in the restricted strategic environment for Blue Homeland's development. One of the most critical turning points of this era between 2004 and 2010 was the public spat between Erdoğan and Israeli President Simon Peres at the Davos Summit in 2009, also known as the "One Minute" incident (Hintz 2018). Previously, Turkey acted as a mediator over the status of Gaza, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights for a comprehensive settlement between Syria and Israel in 2008. It also partnered with Brazil to mediate on behalf of Western powers about Iran's nuclear program. However, Lisel Hintz highlights that Islamists in the Turkish government viewed Israelis as "oppressors of fellow Muslim Palestinians" and Israel became an "explicit target of animosity during the AKP's second and third terms" (Hintz 2018, 112). Especially Turkey's support for

Hamas overshadowed mediation efforts between Damascus and Tel Aviv while Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (2009) caught Ankara by bitter surprise. However, Turkey's support for Hamas overshadowed mediation efforts between Damascus and Tel Aviv, while Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza caught Ankara by surprise. "The real disappointment came when the then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert visited Turkey but completely kept the Erdoğan government in dark during Operation Cast Led in Gaza," says Tansi, "This was a *fait accompli* that let down Turkey's *bona fide* efforts to mediate the dispute and raised a serious setback in our bilateral relationship" (Tansi int 2021). In front of cameras at Davos, Erdoğan bitterly accused Peres of killing Palestinian civilians in Gaza and swiftly left the conference room, opening a major rift between the two countries. Many people put Erdoğan on the spot for spoiling an important partnership but "it's a lot easier for people in Israel to blame Erdoğan for the Palestinian issue than to admit that maybe Israeli policy has something to do with it," says Danforth (Danforth int 2021).

This major rift between the two leaders would be the backdrop to Israel's assault on the Gaza Flotilla, or the *Mavi Marmara*, in international waters the next year (2010) that killed nine Turkish activists allegedly on an illegal aid mission to Gaza under Israeli blockade (Hintz 2018, 112). Erdoğan went so far as to threaten that "next time humanitarian aid vessels will be under the Turkish navy's escort to prevent an Israeli provocation" (Erdoğan 2010; Güner 2014). The attack and the shock waves in the aftermath led to a complete breakup of close bilateral ties developed since 1990s and dwarfed any opportunity for Turkish-Israeli cooperation for energy exploitation in the Mediterranean. The immediate geopolitical backlash was the rapprochement between the RoC, Greece, and Israel. Right after the *Mavi Marmara* incident, the RoC signed an EEZ delimitation agreement with Israel and cemented its claims to maritime rights, laying the necessary groundwork to start offshore energy exploitation in 2011. Egypt joined this tri-partite alliance and

formed a quartet of defense and energy security pact in the Eastern Mediterranean from 2012 onwards.

This pact set the stage for project proposals to transfer and monetize Israeli gas to demand centers in Europe and Asia via Cyprus, one of which was a pipeline that would run from Leviathan (Israel) to Ceyhan (Turkey). “Had Turkey and Israel agreed on energy partnership, things could have been different [in terms of the regional constellation of powers], but it’s apparent that Israel had a Plan B in case the Turkish options fall out,” says Ünver Noi (Ünver Noi int 2021). Indeed, there was a time when “Leviathan, Cypriot gas, and the pipeline to Turkey would be the anchor point of a new golden era of Israeli-Turkish relations that could have positive knock-on effects for Cyprus and for Greece” (Stein 2021b). But not everyone shares this opinion. Gürdeniz’s close colleague Polat wrote, “Why should we invest in such a pipeline and lock ourselves into Israel? At a time of proliferating Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) trade, we pick the best option in terms of costs-benefits, and with risks its entails, maintain our flexibility to then make a [rational] decision accordingly” (Polat 2019). An Israeli researcher on energy security confirmed that “Turkey refused Leviathan-Ceyhan pipeline due to high gas price” (IE-2 int 2021), as well as limitations on re-selling Israeli gas to third parties. Despite positive thoughts around the role of energy partnership for regional security, the Literature Reviewed showed that there is no such thing as a “peace pipeline”; economics follows politics, not the other way around. Another Israeli expert suggests that “[an Israel-Turkey pipeline, as shown in Figure 27 below] looks nice on paper but needs mutual trust to be re-established and we are not at that stage, yet” (IE-1 2022). Thus, such a long-term commitment would only make sense if relations were not on a sour footing in the first place.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Despite all odds, at the International Petroleum Congress in Istanbul just before July 15, 2016, “Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz unleashed a huge publicity campaign to convince Turkey to buy Israeli gas” (Akyener int 2021), probably expecting liberal factions in the AKP government to support the idea.

Some analysts claim that Israel pressed for a one-state solution in Cyprus so that it could build this pipeline, otherwise it wouldn't be able to pass through the RoC's EEZ, which partly explains why Turkey also focused on a solution to the Cyprus Problem in 2004 (Kılıç Yaşın 2021a, 166). Çağaptay adds, "There has been a tectonic shift ever since Turkey's breakup with Israel. Prior to recent years, the US viewed Turkey and Israel as key parts of the Eastern Mediterranean security architecture. Now, Greece and Israel are the two building blocks of the new (US mediated) security architecture. Now, Greece and Israel are the two building blocks of the new (US mediated) security architecture" (Çağaptay 2021). 2010, therefore, was a cornerstone year from Ankara's perspective in terms of national security and energy geopolitics.

Figure 27: Israel-Cyprus-Turkey Pipeline Proposal



Source: Stratfor, 2019

The breakdown in Turkey-Israel relations also had a huge negative impact on the US foreign policy toward Turkey, since the Israeli lobby in the US is above partisan divisions. "Turkey utilized the argument of 'strategic partnership' as a political capital for years and benefitted from it," says a business expert in Washington (TBE int 2021), "Therefore, its collapse put the US-Turkey relationship and perception of Turkey in US domestic politics under tremendous strain" (TBE int 2021; Ünver Noi int 2021). In connection, the AKP's approach to the Muslim Brotherhood

(*Ihwan*)/ Hamas and other Islamist movements, “plus the receipt of Hamas leadership in Turkey before the ‘One Minute’ and *Mavi Marmara* incidents” had negative effects on Turkey’s image in Washington DC (TBE int 2021), and “did tremendous damage to its regional stance” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Also, the extent of Israel-Turkey relations depended primarily on the military ties between the Turkish Army and the IDF, and secular-Kemalist officers had the best relationship with their Israeli counterparts.⁷⁷ The 2009-2010 break-up and purge of those officers in Gülenist coup plot trials between 2010-2013, as discussed in the following sections, also hurt the Turkish armed forces as they lost a powerful regional ally.

Danforth highlights that “there was a shared worldview between the two [Turkey and Israel], specifically about how they saw the Kurdish Issue and the Palestinian issue,” but some observers like Tansi and Gürdeniz believe that a clash between Ankara and Tel Aviv at some point was inevitable: “We had a period of rapprochement after the Cold War ended. To find its place in the new world order, Ankara preferred to stay close to Israel and receive the Jewish lobby’s support in the US. But over years, a conflict of interests has emerged; that’s because Israel wants a client Kurdish state stretching from Iraq to Syria next to us with a warm water port in the Eastern Mediterranean. Their goal is to re-draw geographic borders to bring Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas in Palestine, and Houthis in Yemen under control. It would allow Israel to maintain its geopolitical security for the next hundred years” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). On a related note, referring to the regional balance of power and Israel’s threat perception of Turkey’s capabilities, journalist Ardan Zentürk quotes a former Turkish foreign minister, İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil, as saying, “the West would tolerate Turkey to grow stronger only up to a point that it is neither be able to crush

⁷⁷ The former Chief Admiral (Ret.) Güven Erkaya, who figured in the 1974 Cyprus Operation and Kardak/Imia Crisis as a Kemalist officer, supported Turkish-Israeli defense ties. When the destroyer under his command, *TCG Kocatepe*, sank on 21 July 1974 because of friendly fire in southwest of Cyprus, an Israeli fishing boat rescued him and other survivors, returning them safely to Tel Aviv and from there to Turkey.

Greece nor pose a threat to Israel” (Zentürk 2020). Still, “the situation could have been managed better,” Gürdeniz adds, “The AKP tried to appease its Islamist voter base by raising hostilities against Israel in the late 2000s. Turkey could find shared interests with Israel and adopt a more balanced stance and mend our position in the Eastern Mediterranean, but bilateral political relations broke down due to domestic intrigues in Turkey that framed Israel as the belligerent ‘other’” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Overall, after the political break-up of ties in 2010, Israel adopted a belligerent posture in the Mediterranean, recognizing Greek maritime claims and lending support to a defense pact between the RoC, Greece, and Egypt to balance Turkey’s maritime power.

1.6. Power Struggle in Domestic Politics and First Cracks between the AKP and Gülenists

Besides changes in the strategic environment, the AKP’s foreign policy consensus included an important element of influence from the Gülenists, a cult led by Fethullah Gülen who has lived in the US since 1999 on a self-imposed exile and is sought on charges of terrorism in Turkey since 2016. For many years, Gülen guided his followers in decision-making positions of the country’s economy, foreign policy, and the military establishment, and set policy priorities in accordance with his worldview of liberal Turkish Islam, a topic to be discussed further in this section. To explore the role of domestic intervening factors in foreign policy, it is necessary to look at the power struggle among different political groups in the AKP’s logrolled coalition including Gülenists, changes in domestic institutional structures, and power consolidation in civil-military relations between 2007 and 2010. As Turkey gradually cornered itself to a difficult position in the Eastern Mediterranean, domestic political developments acted as magnifiers that polarized the society along ideological lines and constrained foreign policy choices due to many competing interests. There was also an internal struggle over whose strategic culture (Kemalism vs Strategic Depth) would emerge as dominant over the other. Two years before the “One Minute” incident, in

2007, Erdoğan's AKP won a landslide victory in the snap elections that came in response to a post-modern military memorandum, or the *e-muhtıra*. The memorandum published on the Army General Staff's website was the military's last test to subvert a counter-revolution against Kemalism and a warning to respect secular codes of the constitutional order of the republic, but it miserably failed. With the army yet keeping an upper hand in civil-military relations, the regime was vulnerable and its ability to resist the military was relatively low, but that did not stop Erdoğan and Gül in the AKP from pursuing their Islamist agenda. Abdullah Gül became the eleventh President of the republic in 2007 and the AKP gained control of the entire state apparatus with support from the Gülenists. Gül's close aide and foreign minister Ali Babacan would be the Deputy Prime Minister under Erdoğan between 2009 to 2015 and Davutoğlu would be his successor at the MFA during the same period.

Shortly before Gül's election, "investigators uncovered plans, organizational charts, and other documents belonging to a mysterious group called *Ergenekon*" (Filkins 2012) that allegedly aimed to dethrone the Islamic-leaning government of the AKP and re-institute the Kemalist, secular order. This investigation quickly turned into a witch-hunt against the secular establishment in revenge for the military's further attempt to shut down the AKP in 2008 through a constitutional verdict. In 2009, *Taraf*, a small but influential Gülenist-affiliated newspaper, broke a story about an alleged coup plot set in 2003, code-named *Balyoz* (sledgehammer), despite serious questions by subject matter experts about the authenticity of the case. It began an intensive campaign to discredit top cadres in the military, mainly the navy and the air force, for involvement in the coup. Emboldened by the victory in 2007 against guardians of Atatürk's legacy in the military, Erdoğan struck an alliance with Gülen to change the constitution through a referendum in 2010 that would enable the popular election of the republic's President and grant broad jurisdiction to civilian

courts to try military officers. This temporary marriage of convenience reached its peak when Gülen's supporters, who had infiltrated the bureaucracy since 1980s, began a massive purge campaign against nationalist-Kemalist officers, journalists, bureaucrats, and academics, or anyone who appeared hostile to the Gülen movement, on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the AKP government.

Gülenists had thus become a “secretive cult, hidden within the state, that was steadily growing in power and reach” (Filkins 2016). Prosecutors sympathetic to Gülen used fabricated evidence published in *Taraf* to “oversee the investigation and show trials of these two alleged coup plots” (Stein 2016), *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz*, in 2010-2011. “There was an atmosphere of fear for those who criticized these trials,” says Ünal (Ünal int 2021). Gürdeniz, Sağdıç, Kutluk, and other forty nationalist-secular admirals were arrested and sentenced to 13.5 years of imprisonment. By that, the AKP's project to “undermine the Kemalist establishment and replace the tutelage with its own power and authority” (Tziarras int 2021) achieved a major milestone. It practically put Blue Homeland's ascendance on hold by another five years until the failed coup in 2016; more to be discussed in the next section. Notably, officers sentenced to the *Balyoz* trial viewed it as being orchestrated by Gülenists under the influence of US secret services. Uzgel argues that “these officers could have been Atlanticists otherwise, but turned much more nationalists as a result of forged coup trials,” as cited in Evangelos Areteos's article titled “Mavi Vatan and Forward Defense” (Areteos 2021, 10).⁷⁸

⁷⁸ The impact of these political trials on foreign policy was intense. “These were the people that the Israelis could call up on the phone,” says Danforth, “When the military people that Israelis had relationship with were forced out with *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* trials, that made it even harder for the bilateral relationship to continue” (Danforth int 2021). On sidelines, while Turkey was bogged down in internal matters with Gülenists, “Greece and the RoC found a window of opportunity to act quickly and reach out other littorals in the region” to form a defense partnership (Ünver Noi int 2021). “Greek foreign policy is the ‘enemy of my enemy (Turkey) is my friend’,” Ünver Noi adds, “Whenever Turkey falls out with another power, say, Iran, Russia, or the US, they engage in a charm offensive to strengthen ties with that country [and Israel is just another example]” (Ünver Noi int 2021).

At that point, an often-overlooked crack appeared between Gülenists and the AKP, and that was upon the *Mavi Marmara* incident and degradation of relations with Israel. To recap, the AKP is the “latest in a long line of parties affiliated with the ‘*Millî Görüş*’ tradition” (Caliskan and Waldman 2017, 7). Even though it shared transnational ideological roots with the Muslim Brotherhood activist Sayyid Qutb’s Islamism, there was a pervasive influence of Turkish nationalism and anti-Israeli sentiment on the “state-dominant political culture” of Islamists in Turkey, including the AKP (Duran and Çınar 2008, 23). This was in contrast with the grassroots, business-oriented Gülenist cult’s close skirt with “international opportunity structures shaped by globalization” (Duran and Çınar 2008, 32) that was concerned less with the plight of political Islam than with the expansion of their influential network. After the *Mavi Marmara* incident, speaking from Pennsylvania, Gülen quickly expressed disapproval of the Turkish aid mission, labelled it as provocative, and picked a side with Israel, showing the first signs of a crack between him and Erdoğan (Caliskan and Waldman 2017, 22).

For Gülen, the state should have eschewed “pan-Islamic movements” and operated “within the framework of intellectual and religious freedoms” (Fuller 2008, 60). However, the AKP’s conservative democracy imprint conformed to the legacy of *Millî Görüş*’s Turkish-Islamic tradition that recognized religious and cultural rights, but it maintained the state-centric model of authority and power brokerage. Gülen instead wanted a “liberal Turkish Islam independent of the state structure under the framework of his ecumenical outreach” (Fuller 2008, 60). On a side note, despite Gülen’s apparent disdain for government oversight, his cult infiltrated into all main branches of the Turkish state apparatus to capture it from within and even tried to topple the regime by force in 2016. As political stakes heightened with the break-out of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, Erdoğan conveniently dropped his initial non-confrontational rhetoric against Gülen and

intensified his assertive approach to attain a leadership role in regional politics along with his Islamist ideology.

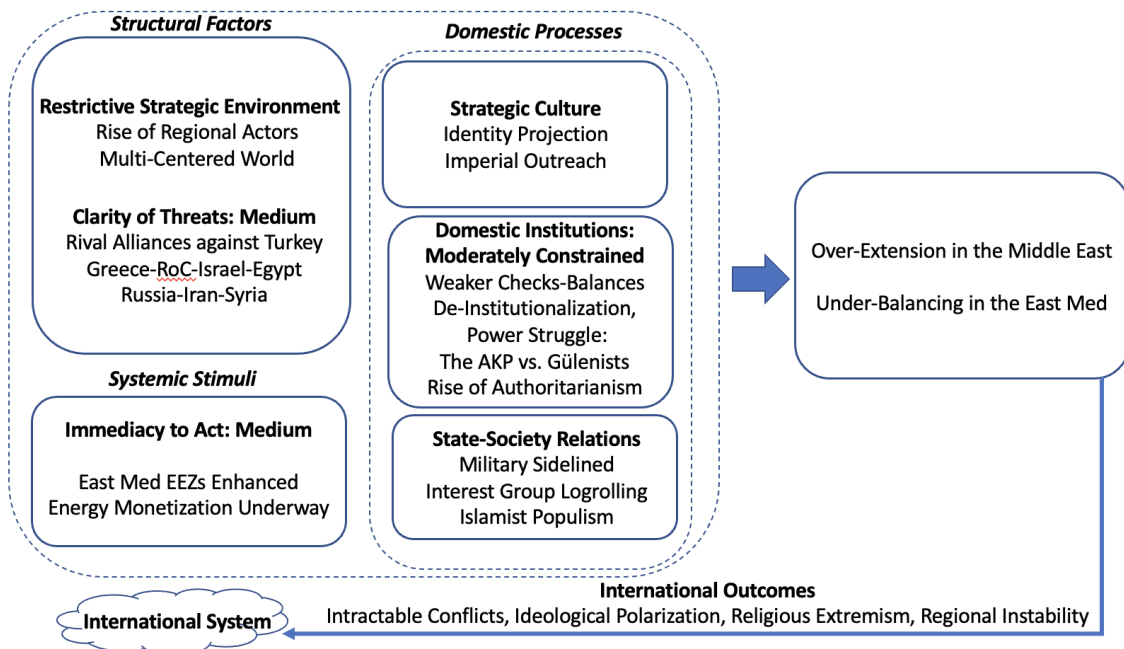
Amidst contradictory policies, Turkey was going through a turbulent period by the end of 2010. It had a *de facto* coalition government under the AKP, constrained by competing interests, ideological factions, still somewhat effective but highly politicized checks and balances, and a demoralised military. The navy's effort to set out a grand strategic vision for blue-water aspirations stumbled at roadblocks as the AKP tried to substitute an alternative strategic culture, a counter-paradigm against Kemalism. Yet, structural pressures and systemic stimuli from the near abroad presented higher clarity of threats and immediacy to act for national security that required a robust navy. There was no elite consensus and cohesion on the strategic response to enact balancing behavior against perceived threats from the RoC, Greece, and the EU. Just when the military needed its experienced, high-ranking officers most, forged coup trials by Gülenists paralyzed the command structure of the navy and the air force. Turkey's trade ties and quest for access to energy sources expanded but it could not act as assertively as it could to deter its traditional foes from taking initiatives and advancing their national agendas to a multilateral level. As elaborated in the next section, the Arab Uprisings in 2011 complicated this situation further and buried the AKP's last hopes for regional influence along with its Islamist vision.

2. Identity Projection and Axis Shift toward the Middle East: 2010-2016

Besides showing the limits of Davutoğlu's Strategic Depth and the "zero problems with neighbours" policy, this section explores why the logrolled coalition between the AKP, Gülenists, and liberals broke up and opened space for Blue Homeland's re-emergence after 2016. The period between 2010 and 2016 was the zenith of the AKP's geopolitical and ideological ambitions. The main point of difference from the previous era is that beyond soft-power diplomacy, it tried to

export its vision for political Islam to the rest of the region by force. The economic boom and popularity in the mid-2000s resulted in “self-confidence and a can-do attitude toward attaining regional leadership” (Çağaptay 2021). Due to the organizational and economic origins of the *Millî Görüş* tradition in Islamism, the AKP logrolled antimilitarist, anti-secular interests and propagated some ideological overextension in the Middle East under Davutoğlu’s most active period between 2009 and 2015. For the AKP, the Arab Spring uprisings “represented the downfall of secular-western style regimes” in the Middle East – or “Arabian Kemalists” who, according to Foti Benlisoy, aspired to Westernization – to be replaced by authentic representatives of Muslim common people (Benlisoy 2013). Many observers including Benlisoy and Barış Doster warned that, disregarding its position of real strength, the government overreached into a diverse set of intractable conflicts in the hope of promoting values, culture, and social identities associated with its own brand of political Islam. This section discusses why the AKP’s hopes of regional control diminished, what factors led to the breakup of the domestic logrolled coalition, and how these developments affected the Turkish foreign policy.

Figure 28: Turkey’s Foreign Policy, 2010–2016



The analytical framework in Figure 28 above summarizes structural factors, systemic stimuli, and domestic intervening forces in the AKP's foreign policy consensus and outcomes in the period between 2010 and 2016. In a more restrictive strategic environment and higher clarity of threats during the Arab Uprisings, Davutoğlu's Strategic Depth doctrine led to overextension in the Middle East. While energy discoveries and monetization proposals among littorals in the Eastern Mediterranean cemented a rival defense pact against Turkey, the AKP under-balanced its challengers and maintained a reactive position. Lastly, the domestic power struggle among the logrolled interest groups between 2012 and 2015 led to the breakup of the AKP's coalition with Gülenists and ushered in a more nationalist, securitized foreign policy discourse after 2016.

2.1. Arab Uprisings and the AKP's Islamism in Crisis

The AKP's role-model status as a stable, western-style democracy had fallen into a crisis after the political spat with Israel and disaffection with the EU accession process. Although the country was "deeply embedded in the transatlantic alliance structure," the AKP "dramatically uprooted Turkey's foreign policy tradition and replanted it in the Middle East" (Hintz 2018, 104). Economic stagnation and insecurity paved the background of Turkey's interventionism through proxy politics in Syria, Egypt, and Libya with the goal of creating a success story out of the Arab turmoil in 2011 and attaining leadership of the Sunni Muslim world. In Erdogan's view, Islamism sought to organize the resistance to both the ongoing western push for hegemony, and to corrupt, co-opted native and national elites of Arab countries (Gabon 2020a). Ideological dynamics rooted in political Islam reinforced the view among Islamist interest groups in the government that "the state's security can be safeguarded only through expansion" (Snyder 1991, 2), despite contrary evidence that Turkey's aggressive policies in the Middle East were undermining the state's security.

As a regional conflict unfolded along ideological, social, and geopolitical lines, the activist and independent foreign policy approach of the Strategic Depth doctrine preoccupied the Turkish security paradigm for another five years and tried to curry favor among emerging actors of the Arab Uprisings.⁷⁹ As Stein elaborates, “the big shift we see is that Turkey was the gorilla in the room, a benign gorilla even if it was difficult to deal with; from 2011 on, it stopped being benign when it became the main proponent of political Islamism” (Stein 2021b). No matter how benign the AKP’s intentions were, the perception was that “Turkey transformed itself from a status-quo actor to a proponent of change in the Middle East” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). “The *pax-Ottomana* of mid-2000s collapsed,” adds Tziarras, “and in 2011, you had a new version, the coercive one and being more imposing” (Tziarras int 2021). Such critics found “hypocrisy, hubris, and expansionism” in the AKP’s supposedly balanced and practical politics in the Middle East (Outzen 2016).

This competitive regional order coincided with a restrictive strategic environment and global instability after the financial melt-down in 2008-2009. Power shift toward the Asia-Pacific ushered in a period of US off-shore balancing and gradual empowerment of local actors in the Middle East. But due to the AKP’s naïve reading of the regional balance of power, domestic mythmaking began along with neo-Ottomanism, contributing to overexpansion. One could argue that, Davutoğlu’s strategy “hijacked” the state policy through “imperial myths” of expansion (Snyder 1991, 32), initially through bridge-building and soft power, but later via proxy warfare. Through machinations of geo-culturalism, the “myth-producing domestic political order” engaged in “preventive aggression” (Snyder 1991, 12), a form of expansionist policy camouflaged under

⁷⁹ Initially, Turkish TV series (soap operas) depicting Ottoman grandeur like the *Mubteşem Yüzyıl* (Harem el-Sultan) and *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* (Resurrection: *Ertuğrul*) became blockbuster hits in the Middle East. The AKP’s identity projection aimed to turn Arab public opinion in favor of Turkey’s larger role in the region.

defensive window-dressing. Davutoğlu claimed that the “pursuit of Strategic Depth – that is, taking advantage of the geo-cultural legacies a state has inherited – could only be undertaken once security threats in the region had been removed” (Hintz 2018, 114). However, during the popular uprisings between 2011 and 2013, the AKP’s political elite was wildly over-optimistic about quick transformation in authoritarian states as the ongoing civil wars and refugee crisis in Syria, Iraq, and Libya demonstrated (Reynolds 2012).

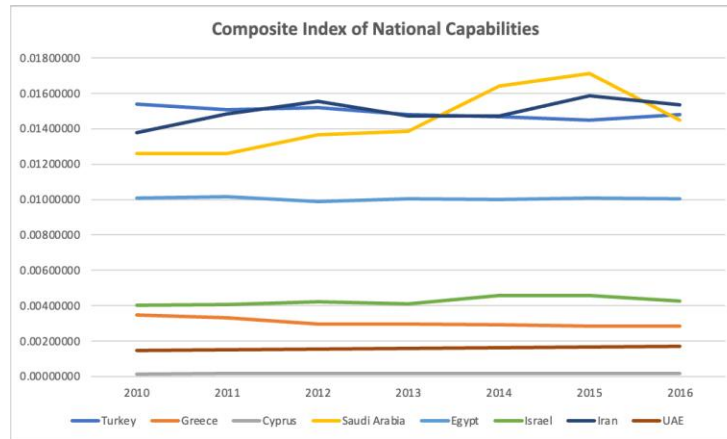
Turkey was not alone in hoping to carve a sphere of influence in the Middle East amid chaos. Russia also returned to the Mediterranean in 2010 “in a relatively slimmed-down way but nevertheless to challenge Western forces in the region” (Stein 2021b). The Russian invasion of Crimea, intervention in Syria, and the concurrent re-armament program “woke a lot of people up both in the US and in Europe,” says Stein (Stein 2021b). After the annexation of Crimea, Russia extended its string of warm water ports in the Mediterranean from Syria to Egypt and Libya. “Before 2014, there were NATO members who would block Article 5 planning because a simulated war with Russia would anger Moscow; that doesn’t happen anymore,” adds Stein (Stein 2021b). Russia also upgraded its Black Sea fleet with submarines and established a permanent base at Tartus, Syria, and Western sanctions did not suffice to alter the reality on the ground, raising power politics once again over international institutions. However, unlike Russia, which acted in a determined, patient, and skillful manner, the AKP overcommitted its resources, prestige, and credibility to the pursuit of unrealistic objectives such as the toppling of the Assad regime (Rumer and Sokolsky 2021) and the upholding of an Islamist government in Egypt. Ironically, this approach of imperial outreach put Turkey in an insecure position, partly because “the state obscures the parochial origins of the myths of empire, which are therefore more likely to be mistaken for truth, even by a large part of the elite” (Snyder 1991, 49).

Despite the optimism on the AKP's part, public protests on the Arab street turned out to be the easy part of a two-stage process, anything but a revolution. Except for Tunisia, these movements had "narrative capacity and disruptive capacity but lacked electoral and/or institutional capacity" to achieve change (Tufekci 2017, 192). In hindsight, this is unsurprising, because when chaos comes to the Middle East, "people revert instinctively in hierarchical order first to family, then to clan, then to tribe, and only then to religious grouping" (Darke 2016, 171). Snyder highlights that imperial myth-making does not factor in "long-run social costs of expansion because of the highly parochial perspectives of the groups participating in the logrolled coalition" (Snyder 1991, 44). So, Islamists and neo-Ottomanists in the AKP's coalition placed high hopes on public protests and low-scale guerilla warfare to build a new regional order under Turkey's leadership but ended up isolated and perplexed by the complexity of tasks they had set to achieve, which were the regime change in Syria and ascendance of *Ihwan*-affiliated governments in North Africa. Although some observers point to domestic political factors for Ankara's isolation from the region, Ünlühisarcıklı does not believe, for instance, that "[opponents of the Arab Uprisings like the UAE] care about democratic standards in Turkey" (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). To help re-design the new Middle East, Turkey joined Operation Unified Protector with the navy against Tripoli to topple Gaddafi in 2011, only to find itself stuck amid crosscurrents of competing factions in a rapidly disintegrating Libya. Also, when the US backtracked from its Syria policy of toppling the Assad regime in 2013-2014 and switched to supporting the YPG/PKK against ISIS, Turkey felt left out in the cold.

In the end, the AKP's political Islam could not deliver the new regional order that its leadership had hoped for. Because of its strategic situation and domestic political (mis)alignments, Turkey suffered from what Snyder terms "self-encirclement" (Snyder 1991, 6) by provoking an overwhelming coalition of opposing states. It glued a partnership of convenience between anti-

Islamist Gulf states, Israelis, Greeks, and Greek Cypriots; then it played itself out in the EMGF energy partnership. As that alignment deepened and as “Turkey found itself on the wrong side, the incentive to use force to try to break out of that dynamic seemed natural” (Danforth int 2021).

Figure 29: Index of National Capabilities (CINC), 2010-2016



Source: The Correlates of War Project, 2004-2021 (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972)

By 2016, in the index of composite capabilities (Figure 29 above), Saudi Arabia and Iran had caught up with Turkey while the combined firepower of Greece, the RoC, Israel, and Egypt exceeded it by almost 20% (GFI 2021; CINC 2021). After Egyptian President Sisi’s coup in 2013, Russia’s intervention in Syria in 2015, and Iran’s come-back to the Middle East with the JCPOA in 2016, Turkey was encircled by its regional rivals. The AKP became isolated and had to necessarily backtrack to a defensive strategy in the Middle East. Ideally, Turkey would not have to make a binary choice between the East and the West, but in the end, “the opposite happened, with Ankara losing both the East and the West” (Çağaptay 2021). Changes in the strategic environment and systemic stimuli cornered Turkey into isolation and diminished its soft-power outreach to build a new regional order along with political Islam.

2.2. Energy Geopolitics, Maritime Policy, and Multilateral Diplomacy in the Mediterranean

Apart from the Middle East, a whole different geopolitical gridlock emerged in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2011 with diplomatic backing from the EU and the US for energy exploitation.

Energy (in)security consideration is an important issue area where the interaction of strategic culture with systemic stimuli brings additional explanatory power to developments in the maritime policy. Based on changes in the regional balance of power, this section shows how the discovery, extraction, and monetization of offshore energy sources by the RoC, Israel, and Egypt acted as stimuli that triggered a more assertive policy response from Turkey. As the strategic environment around Turkey deteriorated, “the international and regional distribution of power in the 2010s became much more permissive for Cyprus [and Greece] to attempt certain foreign policy openings” (Tziarras 2019). Energy discoveries in contested waters off Cyprus quickly turned into geopolitical levers within a multilateral context to coerce Turkish Cypriots into a rush for reunification with Greeks, and Turkey into accepting the Seville Map. As touched upon earlier, in the absence of political reconciliation, the discovery of hydrocarbons has only exacerbated tensions throughout the region by pulling international actors into the dispute. After signing EEZ delimitation agreements with Egypt in 2003, Lebanon in 2007, and Israel in 2010, the RoC began the process in 2011 for natural gas exploration and granted licenses to oil companies such as ENIKOGAS, Total, Exxon Mobil, and Qatar Petroleum between 2013 and 2019 to start drilling and production.

Following Israel’s gas discoveries in the Tamar (2009) and Leviathan (2010) fields, Noble Energy announced a breakthrough of 120-140 bcm gas deposit in block 12 named “Aphrodite” on behalf of the RoC. “When Israel announced discovery of Leviathan gas field, it also detected geological formations of the Aphrodite field in Cyprus EEZ,” says Akyener, “It is a scientific fact in petroleum engineering that adjacent formations of similar nature contain oil/gas reserve potential” (Akyener int 2021). The excitement ushered in proposals for gas monetization projects as an alternative to help ease the EU’s dependence on Russia, which coincided with a growing

demand for additional gas supply in Southeastern Europe. That included a seven billion-Euro controversial export pipeline (Figure 30 below) through Cyprus, Greece, and Italy over a 2,000 km distance, which would be the longest in the world and could have enormous engineering challenges to build a deep-water infrastructure over an uneven seabed (Al-Monitor 2013). Indeed, ENI's discovery of the giant 850 bcm reserve in Egypt's "Zohr" field in 2015 on top of Greek Cypriot "Aphrodite" in block 12 (Shell-Chevron), "Calypso" in block 6 (ENI-Total), and "Glafkos" in block 10 (ExxonMobil-Qatar Petroleum) enticed energy firms to continue exploration activities (Smith 2019) and drew financial capital into promising fields.

Figure 30: East Med Gas Pipeline Proposal, 2012-2021



Source: Russia Today (RT), 2017

Optimism on gas development was high, but even then, many analysts considered it “a delusion, an unrealistic project that cannot die soon enough” (Tsafos 2021; Akyener int 2021). As Israel prepared to put the Leviathan gas field into the production phase, comments appeared that “Turkey’s geographic position and existing gas infrastructure would make it an ideal partner in the region’s energy development projects” (Robinson and Jeakins 2019). Despite the hype around it, actual reserves in the region and long development timelines did not justify any transformative

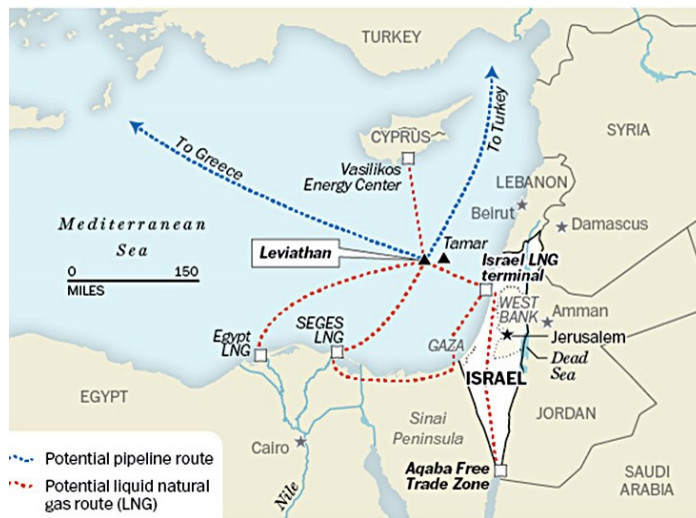
project. “All gas fields around Cyprus combined with Israel’s export potential can only reach a plateau rate of 25 bcm/year and sustain this peak period for 15–20 years at maximum,” says Akyener, “This is only half of Turkey’s demand, it’s unfeasible over the long term [to build a pipeline]” (Akyener int 2021). It is a matter of perspective, too. “Opportunities come and go,” adds Ellinas, “there was a brief window of opportunity in 2011-2012 [to pipe gas over the Mediterranean] and it’s gone” (Charles Ellinas 2021; Grigoriadis int 2021).

To overcome frictions around offshore energy rights, Turkey extended two sensible proposals at the time to the RoC: Option one was to let energy deposits catalyze peace on the island and leave extraction options until after they find a political solution to the division. Energy monetization would thus become a motivating factor for settlement. “Greek Cypriots rejected it, reasoning that there is no perspective for a comprehensive solution” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). Option two was to transfer the share of gas findings to a third party tasked to equitably distribute windfalls among both sides. This could be the EU; thus, each party would sign a separate memorandum with the middleman to overcome the problem of diplomatic non-recognition. “Turkey does not hesitate to sit on the same table with the ‘Republic of Cyprus’ if TRNC is also present,” says Karan (Karan int 2021). But Greek Cypriots rejected this option too. “The perception among Greeks that Turkey is isolated and weak was a major factor in their refusal to cooperate” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021).

Primarily due to the political, market, and financial risks associated with a long-term commitment to gas prospects around Cyprus in a rapidly changing energy landscape (transition from fossil fuels to renewables), the initial enthusiasm died down. Oil/gas production requires processing plants, transport facilities, and, most importantly, reliable export markets. With a saturated market and net-zero emissions target by 2050, the EU has no appetite for greenfield

hydrocarbon development anymore as highlighted earlier. More recently, the US also expressed reservations on the East Med Pipeline Project that the Trump administration had supported until 2021, quoting “issues of its economic viability and environmental [impact]” (Reuters 2022; US Embassy in Greece 2022). In the absence of an aggregator like the EU and investor interest that could combine gas input across many fields with different owners, and across different countries, much of the existing discoveries have found an outlet in the immediate neighborhood instead, within Israel, Jordan, and Egypt (Tsafos 2021). As shown in Figure 31 below, Egypt has the potential to become the region’s gas hub through its large surplus production, extensive infrastructure, and geostrategic location of the Suez Canal (C. Ellinas 2022, 7).

Figure 31: East Med Gas Monetization Proposals, 2011–2020



Source: National Security and the Future, 2019

Turkey’s response to energy geopolitics in the region manifested in its own fleet of offshore exploration and display of gunboat diplomacy against the RoC. Turkey always preferred to hold a regional conference among all littoral states to demarcate EEZ boundaries (Karan int 2021), but after the RoC’s unilateral moves, it decided to act forcefully. As the immediacy to act intensified in 2011-2012 with the discovery of gas deposits around Cyprus, “Turkey felt the ‘fear of missing out’ (FOMO), a familiar concept in commodity trading, and began to invest in its own fleet of

seismic exploration and drilling vessels,” says Akyener (Akyener int 2021). Tensions in the region have been high since 2011 when the Noble Energy-Delek-Shell consortium initiated the first exploratory drilling in the Greek Cypriot Aphrodite well of block 12, prompting Turkey to respond in kind by conducting seismic research and sending naval escorts on behalf of the TRNC. The exploitation of energy deposits by a rival alliance was a clear and immediate threat to Turkey. In September 2013, the Chief Admiral Bülent Bostanoğlu “asserted in a national speech related to the MILGEM (corvette) project that Turkey’s maritime threat perception is ‘energy-based’ and identified defending Turkey’s interests in the Eastern Mediterranean as the navy’s ‘highest priority’” (Tanchum 2014).

Aside from naval muscle-flexing, energy security was “constructed by both the foreign policy elite’s normative principles about regional economic interdependence” – beliefs about Turkey’s cultural and historical ties with the neighborhood – and their shared material interests within the alliance between the AKP and certain business groups (İşeri 2019, 262). Energy deposits also presented a clear opportunity for Turkey. The domestic economic rationale behind Turkey’s quest for access to offshore energy stemmed from the chronic deficit in the trade balance. “Yearly energy imports in Turkey equal roughly the structural trade deficit” (Florence 2021, 28) and rich reserves of recoverable gas resources in the Levant Basin, if translated into windfall profits, could help ease the deficit. Not the least, Ankara raised its objections to being left out of the East Med Gas Pipeline project since the proposed pipeline route would traverse Turkey’s CS/EEZ.

Amongst these developments in the Mediterranean, there were two rival strands of thought vying for influence on energy geopolitics in Ankara. One, in 2011, Turkey’s body of ministers and the state security council decided to own a fleet of exploration/drilling ships to respond in kind to the RoC, “where each such platform costs between \$300 million to \$400 million” (Karan int 2021).

Proponents of this option belonged to the traditional, assertive – albeit downgraded – strategic culture of Kemalism. Two, “before July 15, 2016, many Turkish bureaucrats spoke of permanent withdrawal from Cyprus as a concession to receive a share of the gas export market and become an energy hub; these were the same people who supported the Annan Plan in 2004” (Akyener int 2021). Advocates of this withdrawal option were Davutoğlu’s clique in the MFA who supported the liberal, multiaxial diplomacy, and charm offensive toward the EU. At the end, “the nationalist wing within the AKP convinced Erdoğan that Cyprus is a real national security issue,” says Ünal, “Each time he was prepared to reach a conciliation in Cyprus, Erdoğan’s aides returned to ask him for more concessions. He was fed up with their unsatisfactory performance” (Ünal int 2021).

Davutoğlu’s conciliatory approach toward Cyprus did not materialize. However, with top naval officers in jail, Turkey’s maritime policy lacked a coherent vision and remained limited to discussions around offshore energy prospects. With President Gül’s support, the Davutoğlu group aspired for Turkey to become an energy center, expand its cultural ties, and grow influence in the Middle East to turn it into a regional economic powerhouse. But it was out of synch with the competing agendas of other actors in the region. “Politically, they [Greece-RoC-Israel] made the first move and we reacted to it,” says Akyener, “...we have not been able to set a vision for others to follow our lead. From a regional perspective, we kept a preventive position rather than a proactive one in the Eastern Mediterranean” (Akyener int 2021). This was partly due to “information asymmetry at the Turkish MFA and the AKP’s nepotism,” adds Gülay, “The MFA did not know what our interests were whereas the Greeks did” (Gülay int 2021).

Turkey’s only tangible reaction in terms of maritime jurisdictions was to sign a CS/EEZ delimitation agreement with the TRNC, which was really a non-response since the latter is recognized only by Turkey. “The purpose of the 2011 CS agreement with the TRNC was to

confirm it as a legal entity on the international stage,” says Apakan, “but the main issue was our deferral of seismic exploration/drilling till 2017. We responded to the RoC only seven years later; this was a weakness. The [AKP] government did not have the volition to act” (Apakan int 2021). The Turkish Cypriot government granted concessions to TPAO to explore and extract offshore hydrocarbons in areas that overlapped with the RoC’s EEZ in 2011. The purchase, commissioning, and deployment of seismic/drilling ships took another 5-6 years, by when the regional constellation of powers had matured, and Turkey entered the game late. But even this would suffice to kick-start drilling wars around Cyprus after 2016 as “an instrument of Turkey’s new foreign policy strategy” (Tziarras int 2021). In the following years, together with proxy wars, military interventions, and coercive diplomacy, energy exploration evolved into a disruptive strategy to spoil efforts to encircle Turkey and re-assert its presence as a regional power.

2.3. The Eastern Mediterranean Energy Partnership and Defense Alliance against Turkey

In the context of competing regional interests, “when the Eastern Mediterranean energy geopolitics came up on the agenda, Greece and the RoC saw an already isolated Turkey and rebuffed the possibility of rapprochement” after 2012 (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). Emboldened by a developing alliance against Ankara, two separate tri-lateral security partnerships to cooperate on exploiting gas deposits emerged from the RoC-Greece axis: one with Israel and another with Egypt. Greece and Israel executed their first joint naval exercise named “Noble Dina” in 2012 with a scenario that “simulated possible conflict with Turkish forces” (Fisher 2012; Gürdeniz 2020a, 108; Yaycı 2020a, 134) attempting to interfere with the Mediterranean energy exploration. Supported by the US Sixth Fleet under the “3+1” mechanism (Greece-RoC-Israel + the US), this exercise was a replacement for the then-defunct “Reliant Mermaid” between Turkey and Israel in the 1990s–mid-2000s. Egypt joined the RoC-Greece “Medusa” semi-annual exercise series in

2015 (Shay 2017), and the quartet participated in bilateral “Iniohos” and “Nemesis” air-naval exercises with support from the US, Italy, France, and Germany from 2015 onwards (Hellenic Air Force 2021). Israeli air force received training against air defense systems on Greek facilities in Crete and Cyprus and “simulated a scenario in which they attack a site heavily protected with advanced anti-aircraft systems” (Egozi 2015). From Ankara’s perspective, a rival axis had emerged with a clear mandate to counter Turkish claims to maritime rights.

When asked “why Israel lent so heavily toward the Greek/Greek Cypriot side,” an Israeli interviewee says: “This is related to the balance of power, our policies are solely driven by *realpolitik*. Turkey pushed Israel into the arms of the Greek party by rendering support to Hamas. For Israel, our relations with Greece/Cyprus are a win-win situation. We have lots of pluses. Whoever gets Greece also gets Cyprus, and whoever gets Greece-Cyprus also gets the EU” (IE-1 int 2021). The same source admits that “Yes, East Med gas is very expensive, it’s uncompetitive, but gas functions as a great fig leaf for Israel, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus to come together” (IE-1 int 2021). Ünlühisarcıklı adds, “if it was ten years ago, neither Israel nor Egypt would sign EEZ agreements with RoC at the cost of Turkey. They would prefer to do it with Ankara instead. What set them upon partnership with the RoC and Greece was crisis with Turkey” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). The key actor here, Israel, has a clear interest in diversifying its alliances and fostering common commercial interests with all littoral states in the region. Its primary goal in the EEZ dispute is not necessarily to see Greeks and Turks agree on everything, but rather to secure access to EEZs of all countries, because the consent of the coastal state with jurisdiction over the EEZ is required for the delineation of the course for the laying of pipelines on the continental shelf (UNCLOS 1983), whether it be via Greece or Turkey toward the EU (Çubukçuoğlu 2020a). Another Israeli interviewee supports this slightly more nuanced perspective that “Greece and

Cyprus are important for Israel economically, also politically within the EU to vote in favor of Israel, but Turkey is strategically (military) important. Israel would like to pursue both avenues, it's not either/or" (IE-2 int 2021). Affirmatively, Shaffer points out the irony that "Turkish-Greek relations are more functional than Israeli-Turkish relations – Israel doesn't have to be more Greek than Greece, there needs to be compartmentalization" (Shaffer 2021).

In the end, what started as an "Energy Triangle" relationship (Robinson and Jeakins 2019) in gas exploitation turned into a *de facto* defense alliance against a common foe, Turkey. As a Greek daily newspaper puts it: "Ankara has helped Greek foreign policy a lot by starting rows everywhere and with everyone" (Papachelas 2021c). Saudi Arabia and the UAE would also join this alliance in 2019 and solidify their contributions after the Abraham Accords with Israel in 2020.⁸⁰ This encampment is part of a "broader shift toward a more assertive, militarist foreign policy in the region, which has become more chaotic and violent since 2011," says Danforth (Danforth int 2021). "After the Arab Spring and the nightmare in Syria, military force increasingly seems like the relevant factor in the area in a way that it wasn't before," he adds, "Turkey's foreign policy rhetoric and the modus behind some of the most aggressive policies seem to be in response to and a contributing factor in a regional cold war that has developed between Turkey and Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and UAE" (Danforth int 2021).

2.4. Domestic Power Struggle and the AKP's Fallout with Gülenists

Turkey's policy response to the more restricted strategic environment deserves a detailed analysis of how domestic political factors moderated its strategic orientation. The 2010-2016 period was a consequential term for domestic coalition politics and the influence of interest groups

⁸⁰ Israeli-Gulf cooperation was anti-Iran but also anti-Turkey. "Erdoğan's Islamist rhetoric and emphasis on East Jerusalem has pushed buttons in Israel and contributed to this backlash," says Danforth (Danforth int 2021). This correlates with the former MOSSAD Chief Yossi Cohen's alleged statement at a meeting with officials from the Gulf that "Turkey is a bigger menace than Iran" (Boyes 2020).

logrolling on foreign policies. When Gülenists were at the height of their power and had pacified the military in 2011, they did not stay reticent. Instead, they turned to Erdoğan and his closest aides to eliminate any potential rivalry and grab “power and authority in all of Turkey’s constitutional institutions” (Filkins 2016), starting with the national intelligence agency (MİT). Gülenists were critical of secret negotiations under Erdoğan’s orders between MİT and the PKK in Oslo, Norway to find a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue. In 2012, on charges of unlawful dealings with the PKK, “police issued a subpoena to Hakan Fidan – the national intel chief and a confidant of Erdoğan” (Filkins 2016) for interrogation, who evaded the Gülenist prosecution attempt by Erdoğan’s last-minute intervention. This fateful turnout was the high-water mark of Erdoğan-Gülen alliance, which broke down between 2013 and 2015 with a series of expulsions, closures, and demotions against the Gülenist movement at the hands of Erdoğan’s supporters.

Challenged by violent popular protests, corruption scandals, and economic downturn after 2013, Erdoğan began to draw correlation between alleged international plots such as the “interest lobby” and the rapid depreciation of the Turkish Lira. For Grigoriadis, “with the failing economy, the government tried to shift the attention toward international crisis and blame it on *dış mihraklar* (external instigators)” (Grigoriadis int 2021). This is evident in Erdoğan’s apparent disdain for imperialism’s disruptive and destabilising forces, a phenomenon that he refers to as the curse from higher echelons of the global neoliberal class structure, or *Üst Akıl* (top mind), superimposed on the Turkish national order (Tepeli 2016). Deprived of international support on his journey after the clash of interest with Gülenists, which Turkey has since then recognized as a terrorist organization (FETÖ), Erdoğan harnessed power through coalitions in domestic politics and strengthened his negotiation position against foreign actors. In particular, the open fall-out between the two former allies after the *Gezi Park* civil protests and December 17-25 graft probes against

four ministers in 2013 about the gold-for-oil Iran sanctions-busting scheme prompted the AKP's Vice President Yalçın Akdoğan to leak to the press a "Gülenist plot" (Akdoğan 2013) scenario about the *Balyoz* political trial case.

Figure 32: Gezi Park Protests and Families of Balyoz Defendants



Source: Rengin Gürdeniz, "Mutabıkız," Kırmızı Kedi Yayınevi 2021. The banner says "Salute from Balyoz prisoners to Gezi Resistance. Our struggle for justice, equality, and liberty is one and the same".

Akdoğan's acknowledgement of the plot provided an opportunity for Blue Homeland's progenitors (Gürdeniz and his colleagues), who had been charged with a coup attempt in 2011, to appeal to the Constitutional Court for re-trial and eventual acquittal. In an interesting turn of events, defendants in the *Balyoz* trial and their families applauded the *Gezi Park* protests (Figure 32 above). The air of liberty at the time resonated with many segments of the society who suffered from the AKP's increasingly authoritarian practices. "The democratic backsliding starting with *Gezi Park* is a rupture in terms of values in the US-Turkey relationship; NATO is a political alliance, not just of interests but also values," adds Outzen (Outzen int 2021). As Turkey drifted away from Western institutions and a domestic power struggle erupted, there was a window of opening for *Balyoz* defendants to raise their demands for re-trial and return to fight against their archenemy, the Gülenists.

In 2013, while in jail, Gürdeniz began to publish a weekly column titled *Mavi Vatan* for the *Aydınlık* newspaper,⁸¹ and managed to raise awareness of and resurrect the vision for Blue Homeland. By 2015, upon rollback of political trials and acquittal, all formerly sentenced naval officers had either returned to active duty or started civilian life working to bring attention to injustices they faced under the Gülenist persecution. For the AKP, Kemalists were the least bad option for a “live and let live” policy compared to Gülenists. They could be enfolded into the state-centric, authoritarian power structure; it was a political bargain for co-existence. From Kemalists’ point of view, the AKP was the lesser of the two evils compared to Gülenists, and they thought they could be partnered with to re-securitize the strategic culture. In other words, “highly fluid conceptions of interest” (Vivares 2020, 223) on both sides could be joined to fight against a common foe. Thus, the AKP and Kemalists intersected in their common interest for the survival of the state (*beka*) and started a new logrolled coalition. Erdoğan co-opted Kemalist, *ulusalçı* (ultra-nationalist), and Eurasianist⁸² former officers, politicians, journalists, and academics in his fight against the Gülenists and their allies, a campaign that would accelerate after the failed coup attempt in 2016. Gürdeniz elaborates on the struggle against Gülenists in his first book published in 2013, titled *Hedefteki Donanma* (Fleet on Target), highlighting foreign support behind the Gülenist plot to pacify the navy since the mid-2000s and implies EU-US joint sponsorship behind Greece and the RoC to restrain Turkish presence in maritime domains. The book and follow-ups appealed to a large audience at the time, from anti-imperialist Kemalists to anti-Western *ulusalçı* and Eurasianists. With that, “domestic-political and foreign policy events over the last five to ten

⁸¹ *Aydınlık* supports a rigid, ultra-nationalist interpretation of Kemalism, also known as *Ulusalcılık* (please see Appendix 3).

⁸² Eurasianism takes the *ulusalcılık*'s anti-Western, ultra-nationalist stance to a transnational level and argues that not only should Turkey be independent, but it should also form a pact with the Turkic states of Central Asia, Russia, and China (please see the Appendix 3).

years led to a broad consensus within Turkish politics on the country's interests and on aspects of its relations" (Gingeras int 2021).

Shortly after their acquittal, Gürdeniz and his close colleagues began to appear on TV and YouTube in 2015 and became the voice of a renewed enthusiasm to "make a bigger future for the Turkish navy, more than anything" (Gingeras int 2021). It is important to highlight that, prior to the mid-2010s, nationalism was dominant mainly among the Kemalist faction, but after 2015, it became associated more with the hybrid culture of the AKP-MHP's Turkish-Islamic synthesis and Perinçek's *ulusalçı*-Eurasianist faction; Kemalism has come to be perceived by many as a "backward-looking, conservative ideology" (Güvenç int 2022). Gürdeniz defines himself as a Kemalist of the more enlightened, progressive upper trend rather than *ulusalçı* of the narrow, ultra-nationalist branch, such as Doğu Perinçek's *Vatan* party. Such political factions are not as clear-cut as one might think though. "Kemalism is used as a source of inspiration and legitimacy for lots of different factions now in Turkey on both the right and the left," says Gingeras; "*Mavi Vatan* is a re-imagination of what people think was the Kemalist [strategic] culture" (Gingeras int 2021). However, though Kemalism retains its six core principles – republicanism, populism, nationalism, secularism, statism, and reformism – it still managed to adapt to the environment with its strategic culture. As the previous chapter elaborated, Kemalism has its roots in the late Ottoman era and is primarily concerned with the "survivability of the state (*beka*)" (Güvenç int 2022). This quest for survival is met in partnership with the Soviet Union during the Independence War, with NATO during the Cold War, and Russia after 2016. Like other ideas, it evolves and adapts to changing circumstances. It has the flexibility to accommodate a variety of proposals for national development, only one of which is Blue Homeland.

Ulusalcılık, by contrast, has a more historicist, rigid interpretation of Kemalism that views Atatürk not just as an inspirational leader but as the beginning and the end of modern Turkish consciousness, and regards his interpretation of “nation” as definitive (Perinçek 2013); it is an anti-Western idea whereas “Kemalism is anti-imperialist, and by that anti-American, but not inherently anti-Western in a cultural sense” (İpek int 2021). People like Gürdeniz are “not against Western values and theories such as democracy and capitalism,” adds İpek (İpek int 2021). The main commonality between Kemalists and *ulusalcılar* is their commitment to the independent, unitary, secular nation-state model. Between these intersecting definitions, “people today insist that they belong to these very clear ideological factions, but there’s a lot of crossbreeding or osmosis/overlap including within the officers’ world” (Gingeras int 2021). Therefore, Gürdeniz did a tactical alliance with the *ulusalcı* Perinçek branch initially because they were the only people who supported him during the *Balyoz* trials and gave him a column in *Aydınlık*. As elaborated in Chapter 5, that alliance would break down when Perinçek threw his support behind Cihat Yaycı’s controversial demotion in 2020 and praised the AKP-Erdoğan’s harsh reaction to the admirals’ critical letter about the preservation of the Montreux regime in 2021.

2.5. *The AKP-MHP Coalition and the Paradigm Shift toward Securitization*

The AKP’s power consolidation and breakup of the logrolled coalition with Gülenists was a turning point in both domestic and foreign policy realms. As explained in this section, Davutoğlu’s “zero problems with neighbors” strategy also began to lose traction within the government and opened space for re-securitization of foreign policy and ascendance of Blue Homeland – through prioritization of survival (*beka*), territorial integrity, and security of the state over soft-power diplomacy and identity projection. With Gülenists on the backfoot, the next critical junction in coalition politics was in 2015 when Davutoğlu would oversee the Kurdish peace process with the

PKK to resolve Turkey's decades-long separatist, insurgency/terrorism problem in Eastern Anatolia. He believed that soft power opens the door for hard power; that Turkey could only secure its southern borders by building a new future over "common historical roots" with the Kurdish population ("Davutoğlu'ndan 'Kürt Açılımı' Yorumu | Cumhuriyet" 2009). To develop ties with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq in 2010, Turkey had opened a consulate in the KRG's capital, Erbil; then, in 2012, the KRG and Turkey had signed a deal to construct an oil pipeline from Iraqi Kurdistan to the Mediterranean (Barkey 2019).

Due to their political Islamist roots, the ruling elite around Davutoğlu was "much more interested in the former Ottoman territories in the Middle East than in the Turkic Eurasia" (Erşen 2019, 122), and the Kurdish rapprochement initiative should be viewed from that angle. So much so that Davutoğlu's romantic reading of Turkey's bonds with Syria (and Kurds living there) was "common fate, common history, and a common future" (Reynolds 2012, 5). Under his supervision, the army relocated *Süleyman Şah Türbesi*⁸³ facing ISIS threats to a nearby location (Doğu 2021, 20–21), with alleged assistance from the pre-dominantly Kurdish YPG. The act drew condemnation from the nationalist MHP for the retrieval of Turkish soldiers from the tomb (Letsch 2015), which they considered an immovable part of the *Vatan*. As tensions were rising, the northern Syrian town of Kobane became "a focal point of international attention when the radical group ISIS launched a major offensive against it, as part of its menacing spread across the country" (Hintz 2018, 159). At the height of the fight against ISIS in Syria, "radicalized Kurds [from Turkey] were crossing to Kobane [Syria], shooting people, and then going back and sleeping in their houses... Same [groups] attacked Islamist Kurds in Adıyaman; this just seemed like a powder

⁸³ This is the tomb of an eleventh-century Seljuk military commander, *Süleyman Şah*, who died while crossing the Euphrates River upon returning from a campaign nearby. He is considered as the grandfather of Osman, founder of the Ottoman Empire, but there is much debate on validity of this claim.

keg,” says Stein (Stein 2021b). As the peace process got out of control, the government had to do something, and according to the interviewee and analyst Stein, “military action is what they decided to do” (Stein 2021b).

The turmoil along Syria’s northern border had broader regional implications than the Kurdish peace process in Turkey. Between Washington and Ankara, there is a serious trust deficit, most visibly on Syria issue, which goes back to Iraq’s invasion in 2003 and has carried on for twenty years on a negative footing; summed up: “there is US support to YPG/PKK and Americans accuse Turkey of arming the Islamist/jihadist groups” (Outzen int 2021). Quoting a MIT official in March 2015, Stein says “the message was: we are not going to tolerate [what the US is doing] anymore [in Syria]. Like it or not we do not care. We will go in [to Syria] and finish the job” (Stein 2021b). So, despite the Kurdish-majority party HDP’s ascendance to the parliament in the June 2015 elections, the peace process with the PKK collapsed. The Turkish army’s breakthrough in the trench warfare of the summer of 2015 precipitated snap re-elections on November 7 that brought the AKP-MHP coalition to the government under Erdoğan’s presidency. Shortly after, the downing of a Russian Su-24 jet by a Turkish F-16 near the Syrian border on November 25 ignited a crisis between Ankara and Moscow that ended with an apology from Erdoğan to Putin in a humiliating visit to Kremlin, putting the blame for the shooting squarely on Davutoğlu. Altogether, “Erdoğan felt burnt when Davutoğlu’s soft-power overture blew up and re-started the PKK fight in 2015,” adds Stein (Stein 2021b).

This is important since it marked the beginning of the end for Davutoğlu’s influential but unsuccessful “zero problems with neighbors” policy in that context. Danforth observes that Erdoğan had genuinely trusted Davutoğlu and followed his advice but was disappointed to find out at the end of the day that the MHP was right. “He thought that the MHP [nationalists] were

telling him the truth and that Davutoğlu was naïve and mislead him” (Danforth int 2021). From another angle, Stein adds that “the collapse of the Kurdish peace process and the concurrent US partnership with the YPG drove a nail into the coffin of the applicability of Strategic Depth and this idea of soft power driving Turkish foreign policy” (Stein 2021b). After the controversy in Syria, “Americans preferred punishment (cold shoulder) to apply Putin-type pressure on Turkey” (Stein 2021b), and over the failure of Kurdish reconciliation efforts and the breakup with Gülenists, Erdoğan hastily returned to traditional authoritarian nationalism and his roots in *Millî Görüş* tradition.⁸⁴ This political re-alignment in the AKP government had important implications on strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations for the next five years. In contrast to the previous era, the new domestic coalition followed a decisively nationalist discourse that carried Eurasianist cliques. After 2015, Erdoğan would use the fight against the PKK to try to push through constitutional amendments in 2017 to create a presidential system for election in 2018. As the security focus shifted back to Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, the defense establishment’s main goals would be to break the Greece-RoC maritime axis and prevent Kurdish insurgents (YPG) affiliated with the PKK from forming an autonomous belt along northern Syria. The blueprint to carve a “strategic moat” (US-GE 2021) around Turkey’s soft underbelly via hard power would become a central pillar of Ankara’s securitized foreign policy in the post-2016 era.

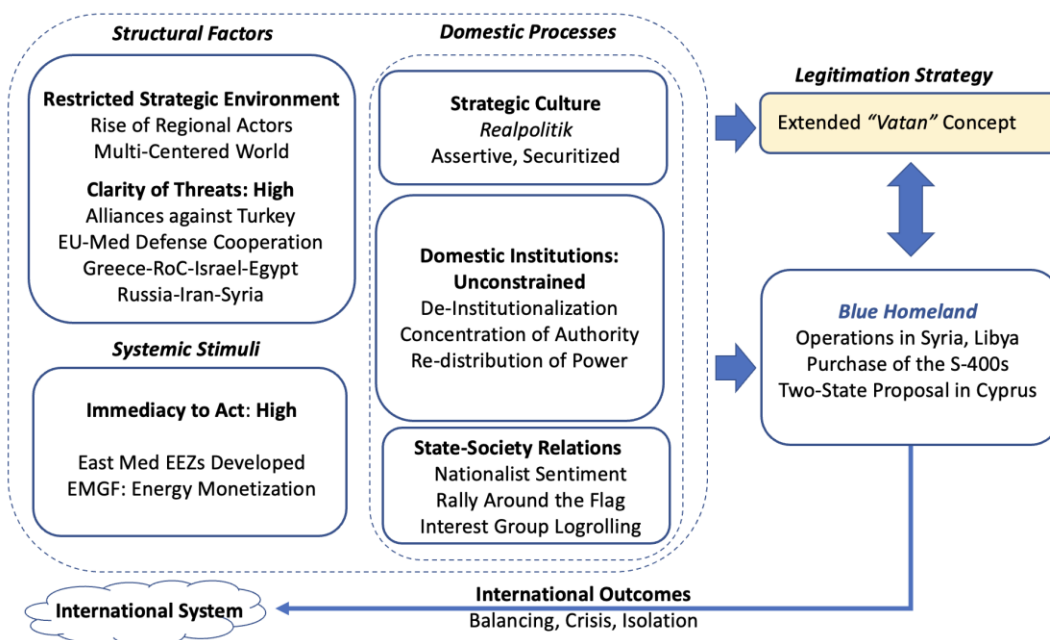
3. Re-Securitization and the Emergence of Blue Homeland: 2016-2021

Based on the pillars of a new strategic paradigm after 2015, Blue Homeland ascended as an outcome of power consolidation in domestic politics and re-securitization in foreign policy. This section explores how it happened and what changed since 2016. Many of the interviewees

⁸⁴ Erdoğan said in 2003 that “we changed the *Millî Görüş* jacket, the AKP is a successor to Democrat Party (DP)” (*Biç hepimiz Millî Görüş elbisesini dışarıda bıraktık, AKP DP’nin devamı*) (Erdoğan 2003), but this was probably a rhetorical statement to appease liberal democrats in the AKP. Most of the MPs with background in Erbakan’s tradition refused to detach from *Millî Görüş* and, as it turned out after 2009, Erdoğan began to reinforce the AKP’s Turkish-Islamic roots.

highlight that the most important event during the AKP’s reign in Turkey since 2002 was the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. On that night, Turkey thwarted a putschist takeover by Gülenists in the army, an event that would have a profound impact on the country’s geopolitical orientation, foreign relations, and domestic politics. “Turkey’s perception of its near abroad changed dramatically,” says Tansi, “which triggered a quest for strategic autonomy and compartmentalization of foreign policy” (Tansi int 2021). For Erdoğan, it provided the justification to develop a hostile rhetoric against external forces behind the coup and rally public support for a militaristic policy of intervention in abroad. “Feeling betrayed by his western allies” (Filis int 2021), he announced this shift in Turkey’s national security policy in an October 2016 speech as “we will not wait until the threats are at our borders” (Erdoğan 2016). To contextualize it within the American framework, “this is in the same genre as George W. Bush’s pre-emptive strike doctrine,” says Stein (Stein 2021b). On the domestic front, “once the Erdoğan-Gülen relationship broke down, Gülenists were doing everything they could to tarnish Erdoğan’s image in abroad,” adds Danforth (Danforth int 2021).

Figure 33: Turkey’s Foreign Policy, 2016-2020



The analytical framework in Figure 33 above summarizes the AKP's foreign policy consensus and outcomes in the period between 2016 and 2020. On the backdrop of a new logrolled coalition and re-emergence of Kemalist strategic culture as dominant over the Strategic Depth, the disdain against Gülenists transcended ideological divides between former rivals in the bureaucracy. The coalition brought military officers, AKP-MHP politicians, and media pundits together around the common goal to resuscitate a powerful central authority and support it with *Vatan* as a political legitimization strategy. The goal would be to develop capabilities for self-help to defend Turkey against its perceived foes both within and in abroad. In an atmosphere of rising nationalism and rally-around-the-flag campaign, Blue Homeland would be a tactical front in the wider strategic conflict that involves Libya, Cyprus, Syria, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Five tangible consequences of this policy shift were military incursions into Syria (2016-2020), maritime demarcation in the Eastern Mediterranean with Libya (2019), purchase of the S-400s from Russia (2019), liberation of Nagorno-Karabagh in Azerbaijan (2020), and proposal for a two-state solution in Cyprus (2021).

3.1. US-Turkey Relations and Turkey's Post-Coup Foreign Policy Re-Orientation

By applying the analytical framework, this section discusses why Turkey's foreign policy shifted in a more hardline direction after July 2016 and how it manifested in its foreign relations. It explains how power consolidation, sharpening of security threats, and Ankara's perception of the EU-US as a belligerent alliance changed Turkey's foreign policy consensus and ushered in the rise of Blue Homeland. Essentially, Turkey's post-coup threat perception differed markedly from the conspicuous bipolar logic in the US. Although the traditional concept of security has been tied to "military strength and its role in the physical protection of the nation-state from external threats" (Tickner 1988, 429), advanced states with high interdependence have multidimensional national

interests. The perception in Ankara was that Turkey's geostrategic importance for the US policymakers has declined, and with a growing number of unsettled disputes, "fundamentals of this bilateral relationship have come to be questioned" (Ülgen 2021). It turned out that for the US, the political cost of "losing" Turkey is considerably less acute than before (Ülgen 2021). "Yes, Turkey is an important pivotal country, but it's not a must-have ally, not even as a wing-state in NATO," says a business expert based in Washington, "Due to clash of interests, rupture in military relations, and trust deficit that accumulated in the last ten years, American defense planners developed alternatives to Turkey in terms of military access, especially in regards to dealing with Russia" (TBE int 2021). In the post-coup period, Ankara perceived the US pivot to regional alternative actors as a threat to its own security interests and, therefore, put forward policy preferences toward self-sufficiency, hard-power coercion, and pre-emption of regional threat vectors.

Considering US-Turkey defense ties, the most valuable US military asset on Turkish soil is not İncirlik Base as many would think but the X-band radar in Malatya, Kürecik for early-warning against Iranian ballistic missiles (TBE int 2021; Stein 2021b). Even then, previous top-line strategic alignment with "how do we keep Turkey bound into the international order, the Atlantic system/NATO?" subsided and came down to maintaining physical things like the Kürecik radar (Stein 2021b). Turkey thus found itself in a disadvantaged, vulnerable position in the international system against the US compared to earlier years of the AKP. Unable to do a "grand bargain" with Washington on all outstanding issues, it does not want to fit into a US-led strategic straitjacket. Kadir Has University's report in 2020 highlights that 70% of the Turkish population sees the US as the top threat to Turkey and ranks Washington's relationship with the PYD/YPG as the biggest problem in the bilateral relationship (Aydın 2020, 74).

From Washington's point of view, especially on values-based issues, some people in the US frame Turkey's rise in relative power as "antithetical to US interests, rogue state" (Outzen int 2021). US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Head Bob Menendez, for instance, says, "When you share our values, we cherish you as an ally. When you don't share our values, there's trouble" (Papachelas 2021b). But there is also "oversimplification and essentialism: '*Reductio et Erdoğanum*'" as Soner Çağaptay puts it, which is "Erdoğan is Turkey, he is a dictator, he controls Turkey and therefore Turkey is bad" (Outzen int 2021). This portrays Turkey as an aggressive, revanchist actor, a would-be neo-Ottoman, imperialist power that needs to be blocked or countered, which "fits into the orientalist view of Turkey from the West with Erdoğan branded as the 'sultan'" (Grigoriadis int 2021). Some people argue that the US uses the word "authoritarian" extensively for anyone who resists American hegemony (Carnelos 2021). No matter the reason, it supports the prevalent view in Washington toward Turkey for the past decade that it is a problem country, not a solution-developer, but a problem-maker. Due to memories of the previous experience with Davutoğlu's revisionist policy, "Blue Homeland is seen through a similar lens in Washington," adds a business expert, "i.e., as an expansionist, neo-Ottomanist strategy, for right or wrong" (TBE int 2021).

Regarding the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey, the reality is that "even if there was someone else other than Erdoğan in power, Turkish foreign policy would not be drastically different" (Ünver Noi int 2021). There is no observable data/implication at hand to compare against or to do a counterfactual claim that "had it been this way, it would have turned out otherwise," but interview responses, opinion polls, and public statements confirm Ünver Noi's claim. Although Erdoğan is an exacerbating factor, there are "strategic and economic drivers" (Outzen int 2021), such as the US support for the YPG in Syria, sanctions on Turkish defense industry, and the fate of Fethullah

Gülen since the failed coup attempt in 2016 that weaken the US-Turkey relationship. These pain points include broader structural conflicts, clashes of interests, and clashes of perceptions in the wider Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean “independent of who is running Turkey or the US” (Danforth int 2021). Since Turkish foreign policy is more “self-interested” (Stein 2021b) than prior to the failed coup, “there is a general desire in Turkey to play a bigger role in the Eastern Mediterranean,” adds Gingeras, “and it’s very zero-sum: anybody else’s gain is Turkey’s loss. This is a moment for Turkey to secure the kinds of gains and interest” which is not aligned with the way the US sees the region (Gingeras int 2021).

Putting Turkey’s strategic environment in perspective, structural factors in the international system played an important part in its foreign policy re-alignment. After the failed coup, souring relations between Ankara and Washington coincided with Turkey’s long-run quest for strategic autonomy. Five years after the Arab Uprisings began, aggregate shifts in relative distribution of capabilities and anticipated power trends pointed toward a downgrade in America’s engagement with the Middle East, a resurgent Russia, and the rise of China. For the emergence of a multicentered world, Fukuyama observes that “the degree of unipolarity during the peak period of American hegemony between the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 and the global financial crisis in 2007-8 has been relatively rare in history; the world has been reverting to a more normal state of multipolarity ever since, with China, Russia, India, and other centers gaining power relative to America” (Fukuyama 2021). As the era of US primacy and the American-led system of global values and norms came under challenge, the return of great power competition and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine⁸⁵ enabled dominant powers to carve out zones of influence. Russia established an A2/AD bubble and claimed a much larger role in Eastern Europe and the

⁸⁵ MAD: Use of nuclear weapons assures complete annihilation of both defender(s) and attacker(s) in an armed conflict.

Middle East while China rapidly expanded its trade partnerships and economic clout over regional actors. “The West’s assumption that the arc of history naturally bends in its direction is looking naïve” writes a columnist on NY Times about Russian activism in Eurasia (Miller 2022). For one, it is much clearer today that Xi Jinping “intends to pursue a more assertive nationalist policy” (Bremmer 2021) as he sharpens the country’s technological edge and tunes up its military pressure on Taiwan, Japan, and the Western Pacific. China is stepping in through the breach to fill the vacuum left behind by the US withdrawal from the Middle East. Especially its Maritime Silk Road berthing rights, and rejuvenation of old trade routes over East Africa and the Mediterranean brought this region once again to the fore of global security and stability (Ünver Noi int 2021). The Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea are complex regions that are located at the centre of a “new chess board” since the return of great power rivalry (Brzezinski 1997).

From a regional actor’s point of view, the layered order of multipolarity on top of constant conflict and instability in the Middle East provided an opportunity for regional powers like Turkey, UAE, Iran, and Saudi Arabia to shift their focus on the “post-American world” (Zakaria 2008). Instead of a dichotomous world like the East versus the West, it became a much more complex world of perpetual conflict and hybrid warfare rather than one of war and peace. In this anarchic system, as the power diffused toward regional sub-actors, and as Turkey’s capabilities increased, it inevitably wanted to reflect those onto geopolitical arrangements. Outzen quotes one of the foreign diplomats at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in 2020 saying “Turkey has masterfully played multipolarity” and considers it to be a virtuous thing (Outzen int 2021). The then-emerging geopolitical identity in Ankara promoted a multi-vector foreign policy to exert influence on highly contextual issues, as exemplified by the Turkish MFA’s “Asia Again” initiative to engage with the rise of China (“Yeniden Asya Çalıştayı Hitabı” 2019). Clearly, institutionalization of the Turkic

Council in Istanbul with the Central Asian states is a testament to persistence of Turkish nationalist themes in the political narrative and Ankara's effort to steer out of regional isolation. In contrast to rapid liberalization during Davutoğlu's Middle East-centric era, the AKP's authoritarian foreign policy elite and its nationalist coalition partner MHP, plus Kemalist-*ulusalcı*-Eurasianist factions, prioritized closer ties with Turkic Eurasia, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan. Rather than Strategic Depth, the new coalition called for a "more powerful, assertive foreign policy, but not an irrational one, not an adventurist one" (Tziarras int 2021). Since 2016, Erdoğan has regarded transcontinental trade routes over the Eurasian continent as a geo-economic tool to diversify Turkey's partnerships and validate its cultural ties with the Turkic Central Asian republics (Calder 2019, 40).

The policy shift toward economic relations with politically closer partners is not specific for Turkey; in a multipolar world, mid-size, regional powers are increasingly more able to negotiate and defend their interests at the global stage. In parallel, Turkey's relations with the EU have deteriorated due to rising geopolitics, fraying of democratic institutions, and illiberalism. Even though majority of Turkish people support their country to join the EU, mostly for economic reasons, in the absence of a perspective toward membership, "the union lost its normative power over Turkey" (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021). In 2021, "the EC moved Turkey out of the neighborhood policy department to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) department, a terrible development," says Aydın-Düzgit. Turkey abolished the Ministry of the EU Affairs and downgraded it to a department under the MFA such that "Turkey is no longer pre-disposed to join the EU," adds a former Turkish diplomat (FTD int 2021). The accumulated effect of all these elements was to reframe foreign relations in more nationalist contours than before. This multi-vector policy also has substantial support among the public: According to a recent poll by *Metropoll*, majority of respondents (39.4%) prefer to see Russia and China as partners for Turkey

rather than the EU and the US (37.5%); the figure in favor of Asia goes up to 50% among AKP-MHP voters (Metropoll 2022).

The foreign policy re-orientation for strategic autonomy benefits Ankara in two ways: first, rapprochement with Eurasia stems from a mutual enchantment with multipolarity, animation with regime survival, and dissatisfaction with the American-led neoliberal world order. Second, despite their centrality on land, China and Russia have constrained access routes to southern seas, which gives them an incentive to cultivate “amphibious” states (Calder 2019, 73–74) with maritime access, such as Turkey and Pakistan for power projection and security connections. Especially China’s growing geo-economic role embodied in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been an important factor for this change in Turkey’s world view. Ankara wants to be part of a trade union along the Trans-Caspian middle corridor from China to Europe. This is why, in his visit to Beijing in 2019, Erdoğan stressed that Turkey and China share a “common future vision” and re-iterated Turkey’s desire to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Eldem 2021).

Turkey’s diplomatic coordination with Russia under the Astana process for a political resolution in Syria and controversial purchase of S-400s in 2019 are also manifestations of this policy shift. The US is no longer the primary weighted variable that “controls, pushes, pulls, and influences decision-making” in Ankara’s political calculus, “and the potential US reaction to the S-400 deal or the Astana process was not factored in at all” (Stein 2021b). This does not mean that Turkey wants to be part of an anti-Western bloc, but “it wants to be an organizing power in the middle with diversified interests in Asia, Africa, and Europe in a way that buffers it from frictions with the US, or threats from Russia and China” (Outzen int 2021). It wants to act as a swing state to develop ties with the Eurasian world but without jeopardizing its vital interests in relations with

NATO members. This is what Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu calls “a foreign policy with a 360-degree vision” (Candar 2020a).

Some observers see continuity between Davutoğlu’s multi-axial diplomacy and the new multi-vector policy and believe that it is a repackaging of [Turkey’s] hegemonic ambitions: “What Erdoğan/AKP has in mind is Turkey to become a great power, not even a regional power, and form tactical alliances alternating between the West and the East” (Karagiannis int 2021). It is true that Davutoğlu's Strategic Depth has influenced foreign policy, and based on historical precedent, “Turkey believes that it can find a balance between the US and Russia” (TBE int 2021). But Turkey cannot rank as a great power in the hierarchy of relative capabilities; contrarily, policymakers in Washington view it as part of the larger problem with an aggressive, irredentist Russia. This reaction from the US resonates with a growing anxiety in NATO over Russia’s expansion/presence in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Caucasus, and the Mediterranean, and its cyber capabilities as demonstrated during SolarWinds and Colonial Pipeline attacks.⁸⁶ Former US President Trump’s authoritarian leadership style also provided an impetus for strongmen like Putin and Erdoğan to make transactional, business-like deals on sidelines rather than follow a steadfast approach to diplomacy through multilateral institutions.

Regarding the regional security order, deteriorating Turkish-NATO relations presented an opportunity for Greece and the RoC, which re-framed themselves as gatekeepers of Europe against an impending Turkish threat. The Eastern Mediterranean energy alliance carried a “historical

⁸⁶ Speaking at a Balkan Security Conference before the failed coup, in March 2016, Erdoğan said “the Black Sea has become a Russian Lake. It should turn into a sea of stability; I told the NATO secretary general that you are absent in the Black Sea and that is why it has nearly become a Russian lake. We should perform our duty as we are the countries with access to the Black Sea. If we do not act, history will not forgive us” (Eurasianet 2016). He sharply u-turned after July 2016 and inked the S-400 deal with Russia, allegedly in return for Putin’s support to thwart the coup attempt, representing a policy shift in Ankara to move away from NATO’s orbit. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Erdoğan reverted yet again saying that “West failed to show 'serious, resolute stance' on Ukraine issue... NATO should have taken a more determined step” (Erdoğan 2022).

weight” and “constructed a new architecture of regionalism to serve traditional concerns in containing the Turkish threat” (Tziarras 2021). Erdoğan’s AKP had no such historical precedent of common interests with other regional political actors such as Netanyahu, Sisi, Mitsotakis, or Anastasiadis, hence it could not socialize a cooperative regional approach based on shared identity, culture, or ideology. Even though Turkey is both tempted and threatened by the power vacuum to its east and south, Outzen claims that Ankara essentially wanted “a stable zone around it, have no terror threats coming to it, and to make money” (Outzen int 2021). But the AKP’s policies during the Arab Uprisings do not conform to this assertion. Instead, offensive policies, fierce competition, and heightened tensions in the region restricted the strategic environment and ushered in an era of alliances/pacts that exacerbated Turkey’s isolation. More stress for Ankara meant that “systemic constraints largely overrode ideational factors” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 158) and diminished the utility of transnational political ideas such as neo-Ottomanism and Islamism for a regional outreach.

Altogether, when specific policy decisions came down to cost-benefit analysis, Russian presence, Iranian influence, and Israel’s power consolidation with Arabs/Greeks cut Turkey’s ties with the Middle East and pushed it to double-down on the Eastern Mediterranean to secure its marine arteries and create a defensive belt. In essence, Turkey saw this as one large front pushed up against its soft underbelly extending from Iraq to Libya. Soft-power policy of mid-2000s or identity projection of early-2010s were no longer appropriate because other countries were competing and taking things on Turkey’s periphery. Greece and the RoC were claiming maritime zones in the Mediterranean and the US deployments in Iraq/Syria were potential threats to Turkish national security. Appeasement toward the Eastern Mediterranean/Northern Syria would have left the state more vulnerable to its competitors, so “a grab for security through expansion [of the *Vatan*

concept]” (Snyder 1991, 11) was a rational choice despite its predictably high costs. Facing short time horizons and restricted choices, Turkey had to pivot to internal balancing via economic nationalism, indigenous defense industry, and energy exploration, and to external balancing via partnership with Eurasian countries. The optimism of 2004-2015 was tempered by realism in 2016-2020, which elevated balance of power politics above all else, and brought hardline policies like Blue Homeland to the fore. “This is a matter of the strategic environment, conjecture,” says Ünlühisarcıklı, “...much has changed since then and Turkey does not have to pursue the same policy. Its capabilities have increased enormously, and just as it was wiser for Turkey to appease its aggressors at that time, it is wiser now to oppose them” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). One month after July 15, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria seeking to push back ISIS and YPG/PKK to a safe distance from the Turkish border. This turned out to be the first of a series of Turkish incursions into Syria and signaled an activist foreign policy: Operation Olive Branch (2018), Operation Peace Spring (2019), and Operation Spring Shield (2020), which targeted the YPG/PKK and blocked a continuous zone of terror along the Turkish border.

3.2. The Domestic Coalition, Institutional Arrangements, and Strategic Culture

Domestic moderating factors supported Turkey’s foreign policy re-orientation and maritime activism in crucial ways in the post-coup period. The AKP leveraged the public resentment toward the US/EU after the failed coup to strategically sway domestic public opinion in its favor and re-conditioned the political sphere to rally around the nationalist campaign. Blue Homeland re-emerged as the symbol of naval activism in Turkey because of this nationalist turn, *realpolitik* strategic culture, and interest group logrolling in domestic politics. There is a pervasive and enduring sense of grievance across the political spectrum in Turkey that the Euro-Atlantic bloc undermined regional stability and ignored the country’s key interests on a range of issues, from

the Eastern Mediterranean and the PKK/YPG to the fate of Gülen who inspired the failed coup attempt in 2016 and lives on a self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania. Many opposition parties broadly share the same worldview as the AKP; according to a recent IPC-ELIAMEP survey, “Turkish foreign policy has the most universal support within Turkey” (Danforth int 2021). More interestingly, “even some people in Turkey who are pro-American, pro-US/Turkish relationship took a tougher position [supporting the AKP’s policy] than even what some pro-Turkey people in Washington did” (Danforth int 2021). Even Erdoğan’s former ally-turned-critic Davutoğlu appears on the same page with him when it comes to Turkey’s maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean. In Europe, once the refugee deal got inked in 2016, “the EU entered a comfort zone and turned a blind eye to democratic backsliding in Turkey” (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021). Erdoğan cleverly combined the EU’s criticism against the democratic deficit with Greece’s reaction toward Turkish maritime activism (İpek int 2021), and he managed to portray them as villains of the same kind to his audience.

The dual quest to satisfy a broad coalition of domestic constituents and to reach foreign policy goals requires a delicate act of balancing. Facing a difficult decision to “balance the desire for advancement of democracy in abroad with the hard realities of strategic imperatives” (Ülgen 2021), Turkey opted for the latter. As Mearsheimer argues, “when push comes to shove, strategic considerations overwhelm moral considerations” (Chotiner 2022). That combined with an imperative to sustain the state’s survivability (*beka*) around the AKP-MHP-Kemalist/*ulusalcı*-Eurasianist coalition meant the government could swiftly go through a “*fabrika ayarlarına dönmek*” (factory reset) in its strategic thinking (Tansi int 2021). To reverse, or to re-formulate, Davutoğlu’s policies was not as difficult as it may sound, because “both Kemalism and neo-Ottomanism share a state-centric view of the world and Turkish national interests” (Taspınar

2008).⁸⁷ In the end, the government singled out external enemies to justify the national-statist rhetoric “in a way that is immediately understood and supported by the masses” (Cardoso 2009, 307). In this context, domestic pressures to compete against rival regional alliances such as the EMGF outweighed international demands to conform with normative institutions such as the EU.

The failed coup thus set the priority on domestic politics to build a New Turkey. Between 2004 and 2016, the ideology of political Islam had gained prominence by which previously marginalized conservative masses had raised demands of cultural/religious identity and turned political power into economic power. By contrast, the period after 2016 is characterized by the rise of a hybrid Islamist-nationalist policy, a trend that accelerated in the Covid-19 era. Erdoğan the broker has kept the domestic logroll going but with different interest groups. Under a state of emergency, the rally-around-the-flag public campaign helped to maintain social cohesion, ushered in mass purges – some on charges of terrorism (Gülenists) but some on political grounds (Euro-Atlanticists) – set the stage for transition to executive presidency, and most importantly, re-instated an assertive, *realpolitik* strategic culture. “Erdoğan co-opted *ulusalcılar*-Eurasianists as they were the only survivors left in the army after July 15th,” says İpek (İpek int 2021). The AKP’s goal was to go back to the Turkish-Islamic synthesis of the 1980s to mobilize domestic resources that would “inculcate throughout society the mutually reinforcing aspects of Islam and Turkish nationalism as a means of defending the state” (Outzen 2016). According to Tziarras, the difference is that Turkey “does not have a Turkish-Islamic synthesis anymore; it has an Islamic-Turkish synthesis” (Tziarras int 2021), which points to the primacy of Islamic identity in politics. Considering the AKP’s Islamist roots in *Millî Görüş* tradition, it is a clever legitimization strategy for Erdoğan and

⁸⁷ The difference is that Blue Homeland is a far more achievable, limited goal than the neo-Ottoman project to build an Islamic alliance around Turkey.

his supporters to absorb Turkish identity into the AKP's Islamism rather than blend Islam into Turkish identity as was the case during the military's tutelage in the 1980s.

Ülgen and Aydın-Düzgit claim that the AKP government conceived of activism in Syria/Mediterranean as success stories in foreign policy to galvanize support at home (Ülgen int 2021; Aydın-Düzgit int 2021). However, this does not sufficiently explain interest group logrolling. There is a political-national elite that spans across the ideological spectrum from Islamists to nationalists and lends support to the AKP's foreign policy on matters of security and defense, Syria being only one example (Stein 2021b). There is also a joint domestic-political front against Gülenists. Aydın-Düzgit believes that "FETÖ was firmly behind the *Balyoz* plot," but this [falsely] "led to a pervasive indictment among the victims of *Balyoz* that the US is behind all wrongs in Turkey" (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021). In a nutshell, the narrative was "Gülenists and their supporters perpetrated to invade Turkey, and just like we crushed the coup d'état on July 15th, we will re-assert our presence across the board and doom our enemies to failure". This was a policy change from an emphasis on "patience and negotiation to one based more on confrontation and competition" (McDermott 1992, 248). Thus, the new foreign policy became instrumental as a geopolitical tool and an electoral lever.

Here, the *Vatan* symbol "made the complex environment more manageable for decision-makers" (Johnston 1995, 51) and suggested ways of responding to the restrictive strategic climate. Thereon, as Figure 34 below indicates, *Vatan* became a much bigger and broader concept under Erdoğan than the one in its original context of the 1920s and in Cyprus of 1970s (Tziarras int 2021). Not only Cyprus and Azerbaijan are part of this extended concept of *Vatan*, but seas, airspace, and cyberspace also form parts of vital national interests for defending the homeland. This emphasis on *Vatan* shows that, as a legitimation strategy, "nationalism always finds support,

whether be it on the Kemalist branch or the communist branch,” adds İpek (İpek int 2021). Consider, for instance, how Doğu Perinçek’s *ulusalcı* political party, the *Vatan Partisi* (Homeland Party) re-branded itself in 2016 and recruited/received sympathy from retired officers who were purged during *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* trials between 2011 and 2013 (Sazak and Ertürk 2020). The domestic legitimization strategy was the use of rhetoric around the *Vatan* concept’s reference to “ontological security that appeals to public opinion, recognized norms, and rules” (Goddard 2008, 121) Therefore, “extension of the *Vatan* concept supports a more assertive policy,” add interviewed experts, “Turkey’s activism in Syria, Libya, and Azerbaijan falls into the same category” (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021; Ülgen int 2021).

Figure 34: Extension of the Vatan Concept in Turkey



Regarding the *Vatan* concept, Gürdeniz claims that Blue Homeland is “above politics” but Aydın-Düzgit disagrees with him, saying “everything is political, there is no such concept that is ‘above politics’; even national interest is a politically defined concept” (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021).⁸⁸ The failed coup had a wide influence in raising “public sympathy for people under *Balyoz* charges” (Gürdeniz int 2021b) and the victims leveraged this opportunity. Aydın-Düzgit has a point that

⁸⁸ This is a theoretical discussion between realism versus constructivism, which is outside the scope of this research.

their collective expectations shaped the strategic understanding and lent further legitimacy for the logrolled coalition between Islamists and Kemalists. They demanded a more assertive foreign policy from the AKP in order to recoup perceived losses of the previous era, and therefore Turkey became more risk-accepting in issues concerning national sovereignty (Akyener int 2021). Aydın-Düzgit's criticism toward *Balyoz* defendants is for turning a blind eye to the AKP's politicization of Blue Homeland: "Their hubris led them to believe that the AKP genuinely embraced the concept and that their argument is above ideological streams in Turkish politics" (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021). But this does not mean that Turkey defined its maritime interests from scratch in accordance with the AKP, *Vatan Partisi*, and *Balyoz* defendants' preferences. They just put a new perspective on previously ignored interests, and that is where Gürdeniz has a point that those geopolitical interests are exogenous to domestic coalition politics. Nevertheless, it would be prudent to consider that *Vatan*'s real meaning is not constant but instead endogenous to perceptions of national interest, which are reinforced by signals and responses of other actors in the system, both domestic and foreign. It is the symbol of a collective state-identity shaped through interactions between domestic relationships and systemic processes.

Regarding the re-arrangement of domestic institutions, the constitutional referendum in 2017 passed with 51.4% of the votes in favor of the AKP and changed the political system from a parliamentary democracy to executive presidency. This gave Erdoğan sweeping authoritarian powers after the first presidential elections in 2018. As another legitimation strategy, the ever-pragmatic, adaptable Erdoğan "has recast himself as a nationalist to the MHP base, a conservative to religious Kurds, and a devoted commander-in-chief to military officers" (Outzen 2016). He re-embraced Atatürk's symbolic value and appeased his political partner MHP's Turkic roots. In the end, strong presidentialism and the winner-takes-all nature of the new Turkish system granted

unprecedented executive powers to the AKP as the incumbent party. Over time, “Erdoğan de-institutionalized the country” (Grigoriadis int 2021; Aydın-Düzgit int 2021) and allowed the executive greater policy autonomy vis-à-vis the national assembly and practically above the MoD and the MFA. “Everything is so opaque and concentrated under the presidency,” says Aydın-Düzgit, “There are only short-term zigzags, trying to walk a tight rope between the US and Russia” (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021).

Despite a less constrained government, many people believed that his strongman policies benefitted Erdoğan personally, the AKP institutionally, and Turkey nationally. The AKP rolled-out a techno-economic nationalization program called *Yerli ve Milli* (local and national) pioneered by the defense industry and starred by Erdoğan’s son-in-law Selçuk Bayraktar, “stressing the need for domestic production of goods for strategic reasons” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 154). This emphasis on independence, patriotism, and later economic unorthodoxy is both a sign of combined Islamist-nationalist influence on policy decisions and an outcome of the paradigmatic shift to enable self-sustainment against foreign belligerents. By that, Turkey tries to “offset its adversaries’ perceived advantage through military innovation,” and investment in hard-power capabilities (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 79). To culturally condition the society and legitimize foreign interventions/deployments, Erdoğan also talked of Turkey as a “military nation” (Erdoğan 2018). It opened military bases in Somalia and Qatar in 2017 and maintained another one in Albania. These bases became corner stones of Turkey’s ability to project power at sea, monitor the global trade network, and gather intelligence.

From a realist perspective, when a state’s relative power increases, it always claims more from the system. Turkey’s growing defense sector and techno-industrial capabilities emboldened the AKP government and provided an additional impetus to take ownership of maritime interests and

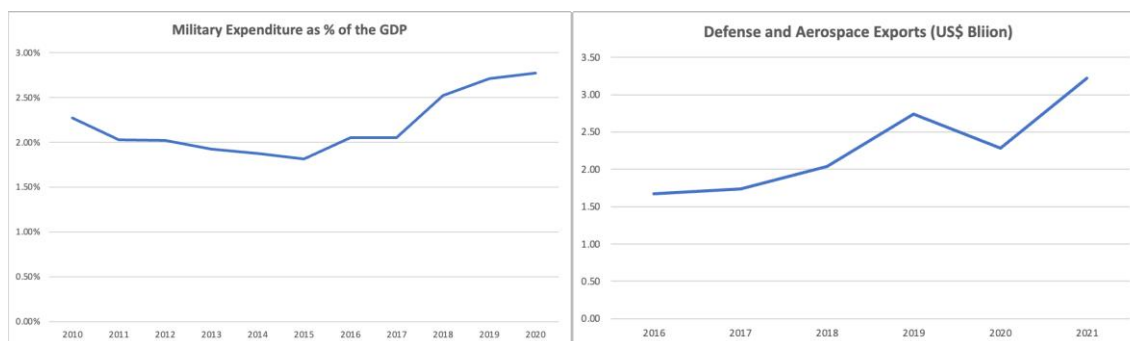
adopt a more proactive state in Blue Homeland. As shown in Figure 35 below, Turkey's military expenditure as percentage of the GDP sharply rose by 90 basis points in five years, above the NATO required minimum level of 2%. The Turkish arms exports sector, which had been traditionally driven by small weapons and armored personnel carriers, has now diversified to include drones, missiles, frigates, aircraft and other high-end weapons systems (Coşkun 2022). Between 2016-2021, Turkey's defense and aerospace exports doubled from \$US 1.67 billion to \$US 3.22 billion and the AKP used "this talking point [of Turkey's military advancement] for domestic consumption and to showcase what it touts as a remarkable success story in abroad" (Coşkun 2022). Its investments in high tech capabilities like electronic warfare, intelligence, and early warning systems surely give it a major edge over its neighbors. Since old concepts of land invasion are untannable, the SSB (Presidency of Defense Industries) invested in drones, cyberweapons, space systems, and AI-enabled robotic units that provide asymmetric capabilities against larger platforms such as manned aircraft, tanks, and air defenses. From 2011-2015 to 2016-2020, Turkey's defense industry exports increased by 30% while its imports decreased by 56%, positioning it at the thirteenth spot among the world's top arms exporters ("SIPRI Yearbook 2021 | Summary" 2021).⁸⁹ The armed forces became much more self-reliant with up to 70% local input in the naval branch.

As the defense industry expanded, Turkey accelerated its naval construction/upgrade program after 2016 and reached a higher mobilization capacity, signaling a notable shift from foreign procurement to domestic production and encompassing a whole array of highly sophisticated platforms with homegrown weapon systems that "increase Turkey's power projection and long-term blue-water capabilities" ("Turkish Naval Forces" 2021). The planned commissioning in 2022

⁸⁹ According to the SIPRI report, Turkey's arms imports from the US dropped by 81% during the same period.

of Turkey’s first light aircraft carrier/amphibious landing craft (LPD), *TCG Anadolu*, which was to be equipped with armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), “marks the beginning of a blue-water capability for the traditionally coastal Turkish navy and a significant shift in the naval balance in the region” (Outzen 2021a, 14). In addition to the *Bayraktar* and *Anka* UAV models, the navy has recently received its first batch of *Aksungur* UAVs with an impressive array of sensors, long flight range, and Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) capabilities, thereby deeming them advantageous for the Eastern Mediterranean. Crucially, the featuring of UAVs stationed aboard an LPD in regional flashpoints would be a first in the world; this would showcase how “middle-sized powers like Turkey can now project force abroad and shape the narrative in easy, straightforward, and cost-effective ways” (Stein 2021a). Especially the light aircraft-carrier *TCG Anadolu* and *Reis*-class Type 214 ultra-silent submarines fitted with indigenous missiles “reshape the naval balance between Greece and Turkey toward the latter’s favor – a triumph for Turkey and a headache for Greece” (*The Economist* 2021b). Since sonar technology is still relatively primitive, ASW by autonomous vehicles become game-changers in underwater (Gürdeniz 2021f). “Turkish defense industry has gone to another level,” says Ifantis (Ifantis int 2021) and “Turkey has the upper hand in situational awareness even in the geographically crowded space of the Aegean Sea,” adds Mevlütoğlu (Mevlütoğlu int 2021).

Figure 35: Military Expenditure, 2010-2020, Defense Exports, 2016-2021



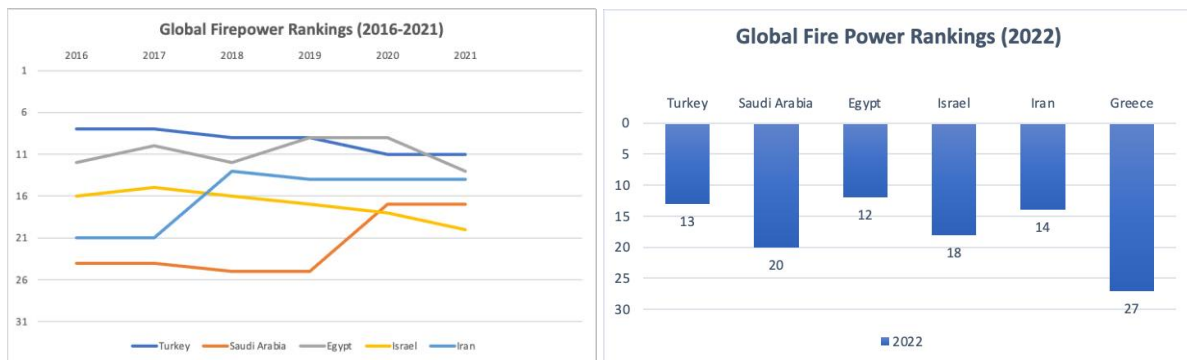
Source: *The World Bank* (2022), *Turkish Exporters’ Assembly* (2022)

For the navy, “this is not mere military modernization but “an opportunity to pioneer the country’s next geopolitical breakthrough” (Kırdemir and Kasapoğlu 2018). If deterrence is “the art of creating the fear of attack in the mind of an opponent” (Stavridis 2021), such developments gave life to a “fleet in being”: the navy extended influence and affected calculations of opposing parties merely by its existence without even having to leave the port. Also with an expanding intelligence apparatus, armed forces began to receive crystal-clear information about threat vectors from rival alliances. As Turkey gained crucial know-now in situational awareness and modern combat readiness, new capabilities “widened the navy’s scope and paved the way for Turkey to act more boldly in its foreign policy” (Mevlütöğlü int 2021). “A lot of it is about power, about ‘might makes right’,” says Gingeras (Gingeras int 2021), and Turkey’s firepower (Figure 36 below) grew in parallel with its sensitivity and motivation to protect its maritime rights. Emboldened by the rising military-industry complex, the highly-successful drone warfare doctrine and the accompanying Blue Homeland concept became “efforts to make up for the missing diplomatic clout and political influence in abroad” (Çağaptay 2021). With a strong, entrenched government in Ankara, “it’s an ideal time to try to impose maximalist demands to get your political concessions,” says Stein (Stein 2021b).

Against the backdrop of domestic power consolidation and armament program, a more militarized, *realpolitik* strategic culture re-emerged to surface. This assertive culture embedded in Kemalism outlived Davutoğlu’s “zero problems with neighbors” soft-power strategy, despite derogation of the former by the AKP-Gülenist-liberal coalition to a marginal profile between 2010-2015. Contrary to Mufti’s argument in 2009 that the “imperial” counter-paradigm emerged dominant over the “republican” one, the paradigm shift after 2016 validates Johnston’s argument that “it is not so easy for states to break free from the constraints of *realpolitik* strategic culture”

(Johnston 1995, 61). The turn of events showed that Mufti’s explanation for the rise of daring activism worked in just the opposite direction: Davutoğlu’s expansionist Strategic Depth paradigm fell into a crisis and permitted the reassertion of a *realpolitik*, securitized alternative, especially with the rise of Turkish nationalism after 2015. “Turkey’s strategic culture is defensive, and it is based on mutual survivability, not hegemony,” says Tansi, “we defended the state against the rise of non-state actors, sub-state groups, and insurgents such as the PKK/YPG, ISIS, and FETÖ (Gülenists) that flourished under a neoliberal umbrella” (Tansi int 2021).

Figure 36: Global Firepower Ranking (2016-2021),⁹⁰ Global Firepower Ranking (2022)⁹¹



Source: Global Firepower Index, 2022

In essence, Turkey’s interactions with the international system underwent a paradigmatic shift between 2016-2021. International organizations, non-state actors, and multinational institutions have lost much of their normative power to sway Turkey. Thus, the state is still the main actor in foreign policy, and it prioritizes security over harmony. The government returned to Turkey’s “nationalist-defensive” historic roots (Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi 2020, 75) and consolidated its political, military activism under the nation-state. Presence of such a persistent strategic culture means that even if the political constellation in Turkey changes, if say the CHP comes to power, the policy over maritime zones and/or Cyprus is unlikely to go under any substantial change. “This has been

⁹⁰ Greece and Cyprus are not among the top 25 firepowers, hence excluded from the rankings for 2016-2021.

⁹¹ The dataset includes rankings of 140 countries only for the current year.

an established defense policy for years among military bureaucrats in Ankara,” says Aydın-Düzgit, “maybe a toning down of the maximalist position could be in pockets but nothing more than that” (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021).

The dominant political narrative around *Mavi Vatan* reflects this historical perspective from the state to society. It means “maritime state, maritime nation,” says Karan (Karan int 2021). “To the extent possible, it’s about bringing maritime domains that have been neglected by prior governments under Turkey’s scope of interest,” adds Gülay, saying “it should not be reduced to a legal concept” (Gülay int 2021). Beyond a naval strategy, “Blue Homeland is a political concept that plays a role as the symbol of inclusivity, since it’s easy to remember and articulate” (Kutluk int 2021). It defines a policy execution space and acts as a glue for the public at large. Some people believe it has not yet reached maturity to the level of “*Yurtta Sulh, Cihanda Sulh*” (peace at home, peace in the world) aphorism and lacks a consensus on its meaning (Mevlütöğlü int 2021) but it still is a powerful symbol in dominant narratives, so much so that other conceptual extensions of *Vatan* followed soon after, such as *Yeşil Vatan* (forests) and *Gök Vatan* (airspace).⁹²

Politically, the rhetoric on maritime activism has been in existence since the early republican period as the previous chapter showed, but “the symbiotic relationship between Islamists and the

⁹² There is no consensus on the exact scope of *Vatan*. Some experts like Ünlühisarcıklı argue that it’s not possible to re-define the *Vatan* concept. “For Turks, *Vatan* is not a piece of territory. We call it *Yurt* (home). It’s a sanctified concept. Violation of our maritime *Vatan* demands self-sacrifice to defend, so it’s a highly loaded concept. What we should understand from *Mavi Vatan* is our territorial waters” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). Other experts like Gülay disagree: “Territory is not sacrosanct, it can be given or taken; plus, supporters of Blue Homeland propose a much more emotional concept of *Vatan* to create a sense of belonging to sea, not strictly within the logic of property ownership” (Gülay int 2021). The defense establishment internalized the concept as covering not just territorial waters but also the CS/EEZ, which defines “rights over economic wealth” (Kutluk int 2021; Gürdeniz int 2021b; Sağdıç int 2021; Karan int 2021). Their argument is that there are gradations of maritime jurisdictions such as full sovereignty in territorial waters, a bit less in adjacent waters, even less in EEZ/CS and so on, but *Mavi Vatan* is a blanket cover to explain Turkey’s interests in all of them. “*Mavi Vatan* includes national wealth in the water column and beneath the seabed, just like land mines or forests. That is why it’s called *Vatan*” (Kutluk int 2021). “You can do EEZ delimitation agreement with a country, share your resources, have a joint-development plan, etc. in *Mavi Vatan* but you do not do that in the original *Vatan*. All we do is to declare our determination to protect our interests in these domains. It is a message that ‘we are equally sensitive to our maritime rights and interests as we do for our land *Vatan*’” (Kıyat int 2021).

nationalists/*ulusalcılar*-Eurasianists around an anti-Western campaign turned it into action and presented a case of naval activism,” says Burak Kadercan (Kadercan int 2021). What started as a top-down Kemalist concept in 2006 acquired a bottom-up Turkish-Islamic dimension after 2016 with emphasis on *Vatan* and reference to national solidarity.⁹³ There was such a pressure from the nationalist front that “at one-point Blue Homeland resembled the *Misâk-ı Millî*” (FTD int 2021). It emerged among the elites and tried to take root among the public, which confirms Kutluk’s claim that, at its most basic definition in two words, Blue Homeland is a campaign for “national awakening” (Kutluk int 2021). As the saying goes, a picture tells a thousand words. Figure 37 below captures the emergent hybrid strategic culture in Turkey at its best. Standing in the middle is Selçuk Bayraktar, Erdoğan’s son-in-law and chief innovator of *Baykar* UAVs, and on his immediate left is the commander of the Turkish Naval War College, Rear Admiral Erhan Aydın. On the back is a painting that emphasizes continuity of Turkish-Islamic military culture, from Seljuks to Ottomans to the republican era. Naval cadets and admirals are on the right; most interestingly, Atatürk is next to Rauf Orbay and applauds the spectator in a rare moment, as if to give the message “Atatürk is just another leader along the continuum of Turkish-Islamic tradition. Had he been alive today, he would have stood next to Rauf Orbay and applauded you”.

However, the extent to which Blue Homeland diffused into public consciousness remains a big question. Some interviewees “do not see a consensus among a large part of the population about Blue Homeland” (Mevlütöğlü int 2021; Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021; TN-2 int 2021). From their view, there is not a single, unified definition of it, which acquires different meanings depending on

⁹³ Güvenç observes that this symbiotic relationship is circumstantial: “It resembles an attempt to mold a ‘Turkish-Islamic-Western’ synthesis after the coup on September 12, 1980. This was tried before and failed” (Güvenç int 2022). At that time, the secular military co-opted Islamic-nationalist groups against leftists, Soviet sympathizers, and Kurdish separatists. This time, the AKP-MHP coalition co-opted secular Kemalists-*ulusalcılar*-Eurasianists against Gülenists, Euro-Atlanticists, and the PKK/YPG.

people’s viewpoints. It appears as a political token among the narrow confines of Ankara’s governing elites rather than a public-wide initiative, and therefore, “as a top-down concept, it did not gain the expected traction among general public” (Güvenç int 2022). This is why, İpek claims, “Gürdeniz’s thoughts found an audience at the government partly due to Cihat Yaycı’s close position to the AKP” (İpek int 2021). But this bureaucratic politics is just one way to explain the outcome. A more plausible argument is that the AKP lacked the intellectual capital required on their part and simply borrowed a page from Gürdeniz’s concept out of necessity: “There is nobody on active duty who could re-write it in the given timeframe along the AKP’s political ideology,” says Gülay (Gülay int 2021).

Figure 37: Photo at the Turkish Naval War College, The Hybrid Strategic Culture



Source: MaviVatan.net (2022)

Gürdeniz claims that “books, articles, posts, and videos of retired admirals on social media had a considerable effect to influence the public opinion” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Gülay agrees that “Gürdeniz has an enormous influence on public opinion, including ordinary people, but this does not translate into political power” (Gülay int 2021). Indeed, #*MaviVatan* hashtag boomed on social

media in 2019-2020; yet most people (70%) in Turkey use traditional media platforms like TV to receive news. The high rate of digital literacy among Turkish youth is a key factor for policymakers to manage public discussion. However, although on a rising trend, online news is popular mainly among disapprovers of Erdoğan, which casts doubt on its political effect on the population in general. 70% of people in Turkey use social media but “discussions take place in echo chambers and do not really reflect the public opinion on geopolitical issues like this” (Mevlütöğlü int 2021). So, how effective the #*MaviVatan* campaign has been on swinging the debate is difficult to measure. What is certain is that logrolled interest groups pooled their power against Gülenists and harnessed monopolies of information to enjoy media advantage over alternative narratives. Gingeras says, “My impression was that TV was really helping to drive Turkish policy in the foreign space. Retired officers played a key role there, especially on these very high-profile TV shows where they discuss important foreign policy issues. For *Mavi Vatan* it was great; it gave it legitimacy and helped to sell the idea of a much more muscular foreign policy” (Gingeras int 2021). Former flag officers unified national interests and popularized Turkey’s intervention in Libya in 2019, for instance. Therefore, “[Gürdeniz and Yaycı] both understand that they possess an opportunity and have certain advantages in shaping Turkish perceptions” on TV (Gingeras int 2021). However, the Literature Review showed that only 25% of the population know what *Mavi Vatan* is, and media influence on such complex issues remains a challenge. To explain this lower-than-expected rate of acknowledgement, Gürdeniz says that “the EU/US engage in perceptual manipulation and inject a competing narrative in media that labels Blue Homeland as neo-Ottomanist/expansionist; this is not true, it is a political trick to skew the point” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Nevertheless, the AKP government seems to embrace that stamp even though critics such as Burak Özçetin argue that it is “an abuse of history by far-right nationalists for populism and

nostalgia” (Toplumsal Tarih [@ToplumsalTarih] 2019). For a wider audience, blockbuster TV series on state-run TRT depicting Ottoman perseverance like *Payitaht: Abdülhamid* (Sublime Porte: Abdülhamid) and *Barbaros: Akdeniz’in Kılıcı* (Barbarossa: Sword of the Mediterranean) emphasize Ottoman-Islamic themes and celebrate survival of the state against foreign conspiracies. They also contribute to Turkey’s “soft-power assets as cultural content... and paint a benevolent image of the Ottoman Empire” (Çevik 2019, 57, 64).

Apart from diverging views on media influence, there are different interpretations of Blue Homeland and clashing opinions about its theoretical foundation, conceptualization, and application. Before closing this section, it is important to address a common misconception here: Blue Homeland is not an inherently anti-Western concept by origin; “it does not carry the baggage of Eurasianism” (İpek int 2021). Eurasianism is not just rhetoric and “there are people like Perinçek who believe that the future of Turkey lies in the east, not the west” (Karagiannis int 2021). It would be an over-simplification to conclude that “Blue Homeland gained a court with the government because the AKP’s policy, for a while, coincided with the anti-Western, Eurasianist ideology of the concept’s progenitors” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). Kemalist progenitors of the concept like Gürdeniz argue that “the West treated Turkey unfairly by suppressing its legitimate rights, and therefore Turkey must develop its indigenous technology/military-industry and navy to defend itself” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Eurasianists argue that Turkey should move in arms with Russia, Iran, and China, whereas Kemalists argue that Turkey should be independent (*tam bağımsızlık*) (İpek int 2021). Clearly, many adherents of Kemalism, including Gürdeniz, bear traces of *ulusalcılık* and Eurasianism in their public remarks, but it does not imply that the idea sprang from Eurasianism. Among military circles, “there is talk of Gürdeniz not so much as an *ulusalcı* officer, but someone who is [culturally] at peace with the West,” says İpek, “he is very popular among his

former colleagues, from lowest rank soldiers to officers, but hardline *ulusalci* people criticize him as *İstanbul Boğazı yalı çocuğu* (mansion boy from the Bosphorus)” (İpek int 2021).

The trend of independent thinking is much more prevalent among naval officers; and to what extent Eurasianism is pervasive is a mystery due to the opaque structure of the defense establishment. Plus, there is little known about outside influence in shaping the ideology of naval officers. Gingeras echoes that Eurasianists would not refuse to embrace Blue Homeland and “the number of pure Eurasianists is quite small, but Eurasianism influences a lot of different ideologies” (Gingeras int 2021). The common denominator between “independents” and Eurasianists is their dislike of NATO, where they both argue that, “due to the influence of capitalist/neoliberal interest groups, Turkey’s Western allies did not lend their support on any vital issue to Ankara” (İpek int 2021). This is what temporarily brought them together with the AKP-*Millî Görüş* tradition. Nonetheless, when the logrolled coalition broke up after the admirals’ letter incident about preservation of the Montreux regime in 2021, the official narrative around Blue Homeland dropped its Kemalist origins and morphed into a Turkish-Islamic nostalgia with token support from the *ulusalci*-Eurasianist faction. This is disturbing for some people but not for others. From a public diplomacy perspective, “as long as its symbolic value appeals to all segments of the society, there is no harm in depicting Ottoman/Islamic motifs in Blue Homeland’s brand image,” says Ünal, “not everyone has to understand the geopolitical reasoning behind it” (Ünal int 2021).

3.3. Turkey’s Naval Strategy and Blue Homeland’s Ascendence

To recap, main pillars of Turkey’s naval strategy were already in place by 2004, “it just needed a name and a map” (Ünal int 2021). Driving factors were Turkey’s “deep, existential insecurity, and strategic culture, updated with the threat perception of encirclement” (Çelikpala 2021). There is a doctrinaire approach in the AKP government to maritime policy as opposed to an opportunistic

approach but only with a prescriptive set of vague ideas instead of a plausible, long-term maritime strategy. At the official level, Turkish naval officers on active duty say that Blue Homeland is only an informal guideline for the navy, not a binding document at the doctrinal level: “There is mention of it in documents for naval training and exercises, that’s it” (TN-2 int 2021); “It is one thing to define Blue Homeland as our maritime boundaries but quite another thing to accept it as a maritime doctrine” (TN-1 int 2021). However, Kutluk says that it would be wrong to assume that Turkey’s strategy is only bound by the “Red Book” (National Security Policy Document): “Inclusion/exclusion of a topic in the book is not necessarily the only criteria to infer execution, or lack thereof, of policy options” (Kutluk int 2021).⁹⁴ More broadly, SETA, a think-tank affiliated with the AKP, proposes “strategic autonomy” for “sustainable stability” as a grand strategy for Turkey, based on preventive, pro-active foreign policy (“active deterrence”), and power projection (Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi 2020, 84–86). Military instruments and capabilities are central to this strategy in Turkey’s immediate neighborhood and power projection tools are essential for the near abroad. This is why, they claim, “the navy is important to cultivate partnership with overseas actors” (Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi 2020, 88). This grand strategy proposal by SETA recalls Davutoğlu’s Strategic Depth doctrine, but the audience for Blue Homeland is different – they are not Islamists/Ottomanists but nationalists. In essence, what it says is that the maritime domain is important insofar as a conduit to interact with other actors in the system and to support the army, rather than its own intrinsic value. This is not a complete maritime strategy; however, it’s an

⁹⁴ The Center for Sea and Maritime Law at Ankara University has a management board with deputies from the MFA and Energy Ministry as well as the staff chief from the navy. Its mandate is to provide legal guidance to the government for policy formulation and to raise public awareness of Turkey’s positions in abroad. This would be the most relevant body to support an arbitration case at the ICJ, if ever needed. Policy development still rests with the AKP/Erdoğan though, not the MFA or the navy.

extension of the dominant land-based mentality in the AKP that portrays naval power as a useful instrument for political gains overseas rather than national defense at home.

What Gürdeniz et al. would really wish to do is to “create a new culture in Turkey that looks at the navy not just as an essential component of Turkish foreign policy but as a primary engine around which Turkish foreign policy should be built” (Gingeras int 2021). That paradigm would have not just geopolitical but sociological components as well. It would encompass maritime culture, economy, and transport as well as geopolitics (Gürdeniz int 2021a). Apakan says, “the main value proposition of Blue Homeland is to instill ‘love of the sea’ in people, for it has cultural and economic/trade dimensions on top of geopolitics, as well as equal opportunity and equal access to seas” (Apakan int 2021). Gülay echoes him: “Blue Homeland’s purpose is to make people re-think about their relationship with seas. Its target audience is the domestic public, not the international community. People who perceive it as an expansionist doctrine internationalized the concept, it’s a devil of their own making” (Gülay int 2021). Apakan and Gülay have valid points, but it would be naïve to think that Blue Homeland is an *Innenpolitik* argument extraneous to geopolitics (İpek int 2021).

In its current form, the Turkish naval strategy document published in 2017 states that “due to Turkey’s critical geographic location, it needs a deterrent naval force with forward-defense capability and a local military-industry complex to eliminate import-dependence on critical technologies” (Dz. K. K. 2017). “...Our fundamental duty is to contribute to Turkey’s defense; our operational priority areas are the near seas; and our vision is to have an effective force based on national power and apply it across the world’s seas near and far” (Dz. K. K. 2017). This is a militarized but preventive, defensive orientation with elements of techno-economic nationalism in it, a re-formulation of the “Toward Blue Waters” strategy in 1997-2000. So, “it is not right to

overload it with meaning,” says Kutluk, “pre-existing building blocks/steps of maritime consciousness and naval power acquired a brand name as ‘Blue Homeland’ to better articulate this concept for ordinary people; it just explains that these are important parts of a whole” (Kutluk int 2021; Ünal int 2021). All this means, as opposed to Gürdeniz’s transformative proposal, the state’s interests in the maritime domain did not change to elevate Blue Homeland. Rather, as shown in Chapter 4, those interests have existed for a long time and as capabilities evolved, opportunities arose, and conditions permitted, Turkey re-adjusted the intensity of its policy options, re-prioritized them, and put Blue Homeland in motion to support the chosen policy.

By applying the Corbett school of thought, which defines naval power as an arm of diplomacy at sea, the navy confirmed its seat at the service of political goals and received orders to execute the assigned mission of protecting designated maritime zones. Vital interests were at stake and could result in irrecoverable losses if Turkey had taken no action (Kutluk int 2021). Gingeras confirms that “it is a re-packaging of long-standing interests, but the degree to which these interests are prioritized or articulated over the course of time has changed. We see iterations of it, but we do not see it as clearly and as forcefully projected until relatively recently” (Gingeras int 2021). Therefore, the navy has taken a larger role than before not solely to fulfill the brand name (Blue Homeland). The causal arrow moves in the other direction: Facing a restricted strategic environment and adverse systemic stimuli, the political authority demanded naval diplomacy as the most effective instrument for deterrence and prestige at peacetime and elevated the fleet’s responsibility to a new level. Naval operations already had a blueprint; with an upgraded mission, they received a brand name and a map. This is Turkey’s “new horizon,” writes the navy’s communication office; “its scope goes beyond a military concept” (TN-4 2021); “it is a continuous process that puts a national character around our maritime zones of interest, lets people embrace

the concept, and enables politicians to support it” (Kutluk int 2021; TN-4 2021; Ünal int 2021). The navy found an opportunity after 2016 to claim a larger role for itself in Turkey’s security architecture, and partially succeed in this. Emphasizing strategic culture, “this is a product of security elites, it could exist under any president,” says Çağaptay (Çağaptay 2021); “The government just embraced Blue Homeland because it has already been the *de facto* state policy [albeit with a varying intensity]” (Ünal int 2021).

3.4. Regional Threat Perception and Defense Cooperation

To discuss structural factors that led specifically to Blue Homeland’s ascendance after 2016, it is important to highlight that the main strategic goal of this concept is to lift Turkey out of retrenchment at seas. It is a tool of “coercive diplomacy” (FTD int 2021) to unravel the encircling alliance, to avoid excessive power concentration in an adversarial coalition, and to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon. Defensive by origin, it aims to remedy Turkey’s disadvantaged position against rival alliances and to take proper ownership/responsibility of maritime jurisdictions. It correlates with a general tendency in the Turkish decision-making polity, whose members “see access to high seas as one of the crucial pillars in geopolitical balance of power” (Klapisis int 2021). One of the reasons is that “facing bankruptcy at land due to failure of the Arab Uprisings and emergence of an axis among new and old adversaries, Ankara aims to counterbalance this with a push thorough surrounding seas” (Çağaptay 2021). The timeline of events shows that Turkey took clear, decisive, and consistent steps to achieve its stated objectives between 2016-2020, the most important of which was the maritime demarcation MoU with the GNA in Libya in 2019. However, the specific way Turkey has gone about it in pursuing this new policy has exacerbated the backlash from the region, which treated it with much more skepticism and concern. As an expert in Washington observes, “if a more activist policy took hold with Davutoğlu era, we can even call an

aggressive policy took over in recent years” (TBE int 2021). It is “applying a disruptive policy, not a constructive one, not a game maker,” adds Ünlühisarcıklı (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). But since Turkey acted late, it had to move swiftly to close the gap with its adversaries and intervene in the *de facto* situation on the ground. As the country with the longest coastline in the region, it could not just watch the events unfold to its detriment. “Blue Homeland in its present form is maximalist but Greece is also maximalist in its claims,” says a former Turkish diplomat, “Greece has militarized Aegean islands by referring to irregular refugee flows as an excuse. It quotes Turkey’s presence in and threat to Cyprus to find a cover for its violation of Lausanne and Paris treaties. There was a Turkish public backlash against Greek-occupied ‘gray zones’ in the Aegean. Blue Homeland is a reaction to such unilateral claims” (FTD int 2021).

Part of the threat perception in Ankara is, akin to “Germany’s attempt to forestall Russian strategic forces modernization before World War I” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 89), Turkey believes that, in fear of an eventual power transition, a declining power like Greece may hurriedly want to launch a preventive war, like the six-day Arab-Israeli war of 1967. The timing of it is linked to the Turkish view that the US perception toward the Eastern Mediterranean is changing. To put it simply, “when Ankara realized that Washington would put Greece in place of Turkey, its worries were validated, so it reacted” (Çağaptay 2021), and it did so assertively for deterrence. Turkey’s anxiety is not unfounded, because “counter to the narrative of a re-trenching US, it is not leaving the region. There is increased US presence/involvement,” says the US Ambassador to Athens, Geoffrey R. Pyatt, “Nobody in our [Athens] embassy would say that the US is disengaging, contrarily we are moving very aggressively to expand the [US-Greece]

relationship” (CEPA 2021).⁹⁵ As Figure 38 below shows, part of the new US Eastern Mediterranean security architecture include military assets in Souda Bay, Alexandroupoli, Stefanovikio, and Larissa (Çağaptay 2021). Souda Bay (Crete) is a perfect place to watch the Russians in the Eastern Mediterranean,” says Stein, “It allows you to project power into Levant. Turks do not give us the same level of basing access” (Stein 2021b). There are also extensions of the US-Greece Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement (MDCA) in 2021 that include upgrade/addition of facilities in Xanthi, Skyros, and Kavala in central/northern Greece, an example of which is the stationing of US MQ-9 drones working in coordination with Greek F-16s.

Figure 38: US-NATO Military Bases in Greece, 2021



Source: Clash Report, 2021

The other reason behind the change in Turkey’s threat perception is that, at the UN General Assembly in 2021, French President Macron referred to the EU’s quest for strategic autonomy and

⁹⁵ Many experts believe that Ambassador Pyatt has played an extremely active role for five consecutive years in expanding the American footprint in Greece and mending bilateral ties between Athens and Washington. By contrast, for a long time, the US had no ambassador in Ankara, which negatively impacted Turkey’s image in Washington (Ünver Noi int 2021).

welcomed the French-Greek MDCA signed in September 2021, which partly compensated for his embarrassment after the AUKUS deal. Although miniature in scale compared to Australia, the Greek deal includes a \$3.4 billion purchase agreement to supply three French frigates with optional add-ons under a total naval modernization budget of \$5.8 billion, plus twenty-four Rafale fighter jets for the air force, which the Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis hailed as a “substantive deepening of the strategic cooperation between Greece and France” (Papantoniou 2021). This is a broader strategic partnership that includes a clause on “mutual defense assistance,” meaning an attack on one would be considered an attack on the other, like the NATO Article 5 (Nedos 2021). The RoC also acquired French “Mistral” surface-to-air missiles against Turkish TB2 UAVs and Exocet anti-ship missiles to cover its EEZ against Turkish warships (Protothema 2021).

Because of these defense partnerships, “Greece feels strong and does not want to negotiate [with Turkey] due to foreign support and its legally advantageous position under UNCLOS,” says Ünlühisarcıklı, “which is why it adopts a maximalist posture against Turkey” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). “Greek foreign policy tradition since the nineteenth century is based on two pillars,” adds Klapsis: “One, as a small country, it cannot fend off foreign threats all by its own, so it must be prepared for defense. Two, this by itself is insufficient to counter-balance Turkey, because it’s eight/nine times its size. So, it must establish alliances with other countries, be it regional or global powers. MDCAs with the US and France give Greece more confidence” (Klapsis int 2021). Turkey saw aggression in this US/EU willingness to put their military in places to defend Greece’s and the RoC’s excessive maritime claims. This is important for the US-Turkey bilateral relationship, because it invalidates *Innenpolitik* arguments such as by Fiona Hill that relate Turkey’s steadfastness only to domestic institutions or ideological streams (Hill 2021). To tip the balance in the stand-off against Greece, and to prevent any miscalculation, Ankara reasserted its presence by

launching an aggressive demonstration of gunboat diplomacy and seismic exploration for hydrocarbons in its CS. A state's strategic behavior is not fully responsive to others' choices (Johnston 1995, 34), and Turkey pursued its own path to counter-balance perceived threats in its immediate periphery.

The political reaction in Turkey toward Greece's military alliances was at the highest level, as demonstrated by Erdoğan's photo in front of the *Mavi Vatan* map and Minister of Defense Hulusi Akar's warning during his visit to Kaş situated opposite the Greek island of Kastellorizo (Akar 2020). For Gingeras, these moves reflect a consensus among high-level Turkish officials that "[they have] a legitimate right to try to shape the Eastern Mediterranean according to the way Ankara sees the world, that it has the right to have this kind of loud voice and big role in the Eastern Mediterranean, and these other states are 'lesser states'" (Gingeras int 2021). Indeed, there was a policy consensus in Ankara between 2016 and 2020 to prioritize these maritime claims at the expense of how the region perceives Turkey, but "affixing, for instance, neo-Ottomanism to Turkish reactions would be exaggeration" (Çelikpala 2021). It is the timing of it that matters. When asked "why did Turkey react then and not before," a senior Turkish diplomat points to prominence of structural changes and distribution of capabilities: "One, due to structural factors: The world around us has changed, pressure points exerted on Turkey have changed; two, our capabilities improved, so we can do it and combine hard power with soft power. If one of these conditions (internal and external) did not exist, we would not have reached this point" (SDS-1 int 2021).

Turkey's capabilities also raise anxiety in Greece and exacerbates its insecurity. On the strategic balance of power, absent ballistic missiles and long-range stealth bombers, Greece (on the north-south axis) is wary of Turkey's strategic depth (on the east-west axis), so a forward-deployed Turkish navy restricts Greece's maneuverability and raises anxiety. Ankara's NAVTEX issuances

and verbal reactions became as part of this calculus for strategic deterrence while the first-move advantage inherent in EEZ delimitations heightened the intensity of maritime diplomacy with third parties such as Libya and Egypt. “Prior to acquisition of refueling aircraft a decade ago, we did not have the capability to operate further afield and leaned on maintaining the status-quo,” says Ünlühisarcıklı, but “when Turkey acquired power projection capabilities, its neighbors re-evaluated their position in the strategic equation, this is inevitable. Turkey now has not just airborne but also seaborne capabilities to do power projection” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). If security re-assurance is what is sought after, NATO is not a viable platform to seek a political solution to maritime disputes, because “based on its cost-benefit analysis, disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean are not high on its list of priorities; NATO is not concerned with energy rights and deposits in high seas; its coverage area is only maritime defense, not sovereignty” (TN-1 int 2021).⁹⁶ Altogether, an inflated regional threat and a domestically more authoritarian, powerful Turkey inspired fear and precipitated stronger balancing acts among its neighbors. The notable change in Turkey’s defense posture supported by an impressive arsenal of homegrown high-technology platforms prompted a sharp rebuke from the Eastern Mediterranean alliance and the rift between the two opposing views on maritime jurisdictions hardened. For Greece, in the end, “Turkey seemed like it is in the 90s, like the time of Kardak/Imia crisis” (Grigoriadis int 2021).

3.5. Naval Diplomacy and Regional Backlashes

To explore how alliances/pacts in the Eastern Mediterranean affected the distribution of power and Turkey’s policy response, this section analyzes policies of key regional actors and their maritime interests in the post-2016 period. After the failed coup, Gülenist fugitives from the Turkish military found shelter in Athens and allegedly provided classified information to Greek

⁹⁶ NATO’s priority is in the North Atlantic to contain Russia. SACEUR naval focus area is between Greenland and the UK (TN-1 int 2021).

authorities. Athens subsequently withdrew from bilateral exploratory talks with Turkey and doubled down on its containment strategy. When Turkey re-activated Blue Homeland in 2016, Greece responded in two ways to maintain the balance of power: internally, it enlisted military manpower by increasing conscription from 9 to 12 months and upped the defense budget by 20% from \$US 4.8 billion to \$US 5.8 billion (SIPRI 2021); externally, subsequent Greece-Cyprus-Israel-Egypt summits received support from the US/EU at the highest level and deepened their strategic cooperation in political, economic, and security matters.

Figure 39: Greece-Cyprus-Israel-Egypt Summits, 2016-2018



Source: The National Herald (2019), ERT International (2019)

Between 2016 and 2019, a total of twenty-six ministerial and presidential summits took place in Cairo, Tel Aviv/Jerusalem, Athens, and Nicosia (Figure 39 above), with occasional participation of Jordan, France, and the US (Yaycı 2020a, 123). “Greece is in pick-me-up mode, they are in an epic, battle-to-the-end mode with Turkey,” says a Turkish diplomat (SDS-1 int 2021). Following the Gulf Embargo on Qatar in 2017, the Greek government enhanced its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE through high-level visits and interactions (Gürcan 2019) to enlarge the EMGF’s capacity, influence, and decision-making power and to corner Turkey into a *fait accompli* in maritime demarcation. Greece and the RoC subtly leveraged the EGMF not only as another driving force for cooperation and coordination of regional energy policy (Youness 2019) but also as a useful tool of coercive diplomacy over Turkey and Turkish Cypriots. These push-and-pull

relationships escalated tensions in an already fragile situation between Greece and Turkey, resulting in greater political uncertainty.

As members of the Eastern Mediterranean defense pact developed and coordinated their policies, Turkey's evolving partnership with Russia and the reaction to it from the US played major roles in the geopolitical balance of power. Delivery of the first batch of Russian-made S-400 missiles to Ankara sparked a row in NATO, to which the US responded with CAATSA sanctions and expelled Turkey from the F-35 program in 2019.⁹⁷ Also, the US Congress passed in December 2019 the "Rubio-Menendez Bill" for Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act to lift the arms embargo on the RoC, provide foreign military assistance to Greece, and facilitate energy cooperation among the EMGF members (US Senate 2019). That provided clear evidence of the US pivot toward Greece and the RoC as expressed in Ambassador Pyatt's words: "As Greece emerged from the economic crisis, it began to pursue a more strategic and ambitious foreign policy; it has become much more involved in the '3 Seas Initiative'⁹⁸ to catalyze north-south connectivity that terminates in the Aegean. Promotion of diversification routes for getting non-Russian gas into Europe pass through Greece" (CEPA 2021). However, "everyone is talking of Turkey-Russia partnership today, but no one mentions Greece's never-ending affiliation and dealings with Russia," says Ünlühisarcıklı, pointing to the reason behind Ambassador Pyatt's effort to keep Greece anchored in the West: "The US puts a lot of diplomatic effort to keep Greece in the orbit and wants to designate it as the 'New Turkey' in the northern Aegean" (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). "A responsible foreign policy approach as a great power is to turn to other allies that could fulfill the same strategic role [as Turkey]," says Danforth, confirming Greece's strategic utility for the

⁹⁷ Some observers warn that these sanctions may strengthen Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy in arms production as has been the case back in the 1975 US arms embargo over Cyprus (Eldem 2021).

⁹⁸ This "3 Seas Initiative" targets China's expansion and covers energy, infrastructure, and transportation projects in Eastern Europe / Balkans.

US (Danforth int 2021). Essentially, the US wants security and stability in the Mediterranean so it can focus on other problems like China and Russia.

When asked “why Washington lent so heavily toward Greece,” Gingeras highlights that “Greece has become a much more consensus actor than Turkey” (Gingeras int 2021). From Washington’s perspective, Athens want stability in the Eastern Mediterranean, has a better relationship with the US and with Brussels than Ankara does, and offers cooperation to make the region a whole lot more stable. Gingeras adds that Turkey shifts to a balancing position between the West and Eurasia, and it tries to establish a new consensus in the Eastern Mediterranean, “which is understood to be more disruptive” (Gingeras int 2021). This correlates with Ambassador Pyatt’s statement that “...[Turkey’s] engagement has been contrary to the type of ally that we would expect and in many respects contrary to US national interests” (Papachelas 2021b). This is why “the perception in Washington shifted toward really seeing Turkey as the party driving the Greek-Turkish conflict,” adds Danforth “and increasingly the way to make it go away, it seemed, is to put pressure on Turkey to change its behavior” (Danforth int 2021). Washington believes that a stronger Turkey alongside Russia would create risks that lead to greater possibility of confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean and take precious resource away from more pressing issues in the Black Sea and the Asia-Pacific.

Facing the formation of a rival alliance, the imminence and magnitude of external threats for Ankara were growing. “The Turkish MFA’s priority is to resolve the issue around Cypriot waters first, then look at our own case in the Eastern Mediterranean,” says a Turkish naval officer (TN-1 int 2021). Similar to the Annan Plan of 2004, the UN-mediated reconciliation effort in Cyprus became once again the inflection point of long-running tensions over maritime borders. De-classified meeting notes from the UN-mediated Crans-Montana summit in 2017 show that “Turkey

went out of its way to reach a compromise on a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation by agreeing to abolish the Treaty of Guarantee⁹⁹ and reduce its troop number to a symbolic 650” (Sabahattin İsmail 2021). But the Greek party abruptly rejected the offer, which was the second big disappointment after 2004 for Ankara. “A solution to Cyprus is out of chance for the time being, unless and until a very significant geopolitical shift occurs,” says Aydın-Düzgit, “Greek Cypriots have no incentive to change the status-quo” (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021), which a Turkish diplomat echoes “they do not look at this issue from a humanist perspective; it is based on cold, hard calculations” (FTD int 2021).

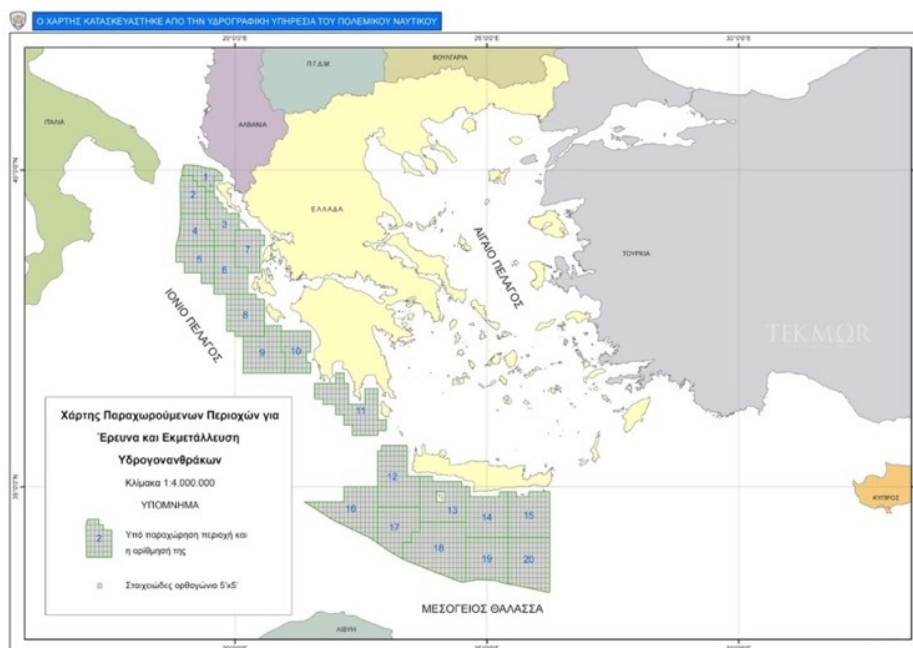
Since diplomatic overtures and conciliatory approaches did not bear any fruit, coercive methods and hard power instruments gained more traction among available policy options in Turkey. “Why does Turkey adopt a hardline stance today?” asks Ünlühisarcıklı, “because there is no real perspective for a solution to the Cyprus dispute. Just like Greeks raised the bar, so did Turkey” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). The government “decided to do a counter-maneuver, claiming that the status-quo is unsustainable and the TRNC is unfairly condemned to suffer due to Greek intransigence” (Ünver Noi int 2021). Had the Crans-Montana summit succeeded, “we would not have been in this situation [of animosities] today,” adds a senior Turkish diplomat (SDS-1 int 2021). Partly in response to the more proactive rival alliance diplomacy enacted by the RoC, Greece, Israel, and Egypt to establish legal boundaries of their claims, and partly due to the collapse of talks in Cyprus, Turkey’s rhetoric and practice shifted sharply, and in a more hardline direction to clarify what it can and will defend.¹⁰⁰ Danforth adds: “Turkey has security concerns

⁹⁹ Article II of The Treaty of Guarantee (1960) requires Greece, Turkey, and the UK to consult for joint action to re-establish the constitutional order of the Republic of Cyprus in case if independence, territorial integrity, and security of the island comes under threat. If joint action may not be possible, each party reserves the right to intervene unilaterally to restore the order. Abolishment of the treaty would prohibit Turkey from unilateral intervention in the future.

¹⁰⁰ This argument echoes A. Iain Johnston’s observation regarding China’s maritime posture in the South China Sea, quoted in his article titled “How New and Assertive is China’s New Assertiveness,” published in *International Security Journal* in 2013. URL: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00115.

arising from the region. More specifically, Blue Homeland’s rise stemmed in part from the breakdown of Cyprus talks in 2017 and partly from intensification of the EMGF and Turkey’s exclusion from that, which was due to Turkey’s previous policies [between 2010 and 2016]...” (Danforth int 2021). So, the *Mavi Vatan* naval exercise in March 2019 came in response to a combination of factors, including the failure of Cyprus talks, almost monthly recurring naval/air exercises by the Eastern Mediterranean alliance, and Turkey’s exclusion from the EMGF’s inauguration in January 2019. In reaction to Turkish activism, Greece granted oil/gas exploration licenses to ExxonMobil-Total consortium to start drilling south of Crete in July 2019 (Figure 40) (*Reuters* 2019).

Figure 40: Greece’s Oil/Gas Exploration Licenses in the Eastern Mediterranean, 2019-2021



Source: Greek Naval Forces, 2019

After the failure of the Crans-Montana round, Turkish Cypriots made one last attempt to ease rising tensions in the region. The TRNC suggested to the RoC in September 2019 a confidence-building measure to treat gas finds as a common heritage of the entire island and to explore hydrocarbons in a joint development area that could partly satisfy the EEZ claims of both parties.

Greek Cypriot side rejected it outright, instead offering only 30% of the gas income to accrue to the Turks from the energy fund to be established in 2022, “on the condition that Turkey recognizes the Greek Cypriot EEZ” (Hürriyet Daily News 2019). When talks broke down, Turkey also saw Greece as responsible for the failure to reach a settlement and decided to respond aggressively (Grigoriadis int 2021). Ankara’s exclusion from the EMGF and the collapse of Cyprus talks had three major outcomes that show the close relationship between foreign policy and energy as a stimulant of that policy: On a radical shift, Turkey decided to solidify its CS boundary in the Eastern Mediterranean (2019), started to drill for hydrocarbons on behalf of Turkish Cypriots (2019), and came up with a two-state solution proposal in Cyprus (2020). “There will be no ‘picking up from where we left off in Crans-Montana,’” told the Turkish Ambassador in Athens, Burak Özügergin to the Greek press (Nedos n.d.). Moving quickly, Ankara saw the RoC as the weakest link in the east-west axis isolating Turkey; and then it sent drilling ships against it (Çağaptay 2021). Seven years after the RoC’s initial offshore drilling in Cyprus, this was Turkey’s first tangible response on the field (Figure 41 and Figure 42 below). “Countries usually do not have drilling/extraction vessels,” says Ünlühisarcıklı, “So, Turkey’s acquisition of a fleet of vessels [and to be among ten countries in the world with deep-water drilling capabilities] was a strategic move” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021).

Figure 41: Turkish Oil/Gas Drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean

TPAO Drilling Location	Start Date
East Med, South of Turkey	October 29, 2018
West of Paphos, Cyprus	May 3, 2019
South of Karpas Peninsula, Cyprus	June 20, 2019
East Med, South of Cyprus	January 20, 2020

Source: TPAO

To explore for oil/gas in the Mediterranean, Turkey would first have to announce its CS boundaries. It had declared only partial coordinates of its CS to the UN General Secretariat and there was a dashed line on the map to the west of the 26° East Longitude that was due for negotiation with related parties for finalization. By the middle of 2019, Turkey was embroiled in bitter civil wars across Syria and Libya and ostracized from the Eastern Mediterranean energy alliance. The closest counterparty that it could draw a maritime boundary with was Libya. Turkey had diversified its trade partnerships and network, built cultural ties and business investments there since the Kaddafi era, and “it wanted to increase the security of its presence in Libya” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). Besides claims that “Turkey is engaged in a nation-building experiment in Libya” (Pekin 2020), Tziarras argues that had Turkey not developed the Blue Homeland strategy and demonstrated resolve through the navy and project that power, it would not be in Libya (Tziarras int 2021).

Figure 42: Turkey’s Oil/Gas Drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean, 2018-2020



Source: Turkish Naval Forces, 2019

There were, however, other reasons as well for Turkish presence in Libya beyond establishing maritime boundaries. Kutluk says, “Turkey has \$US 20 billion investment in there, only 25% of which could be recovered after the start of the civil war. Plus, descendants of Ottoman Turks live

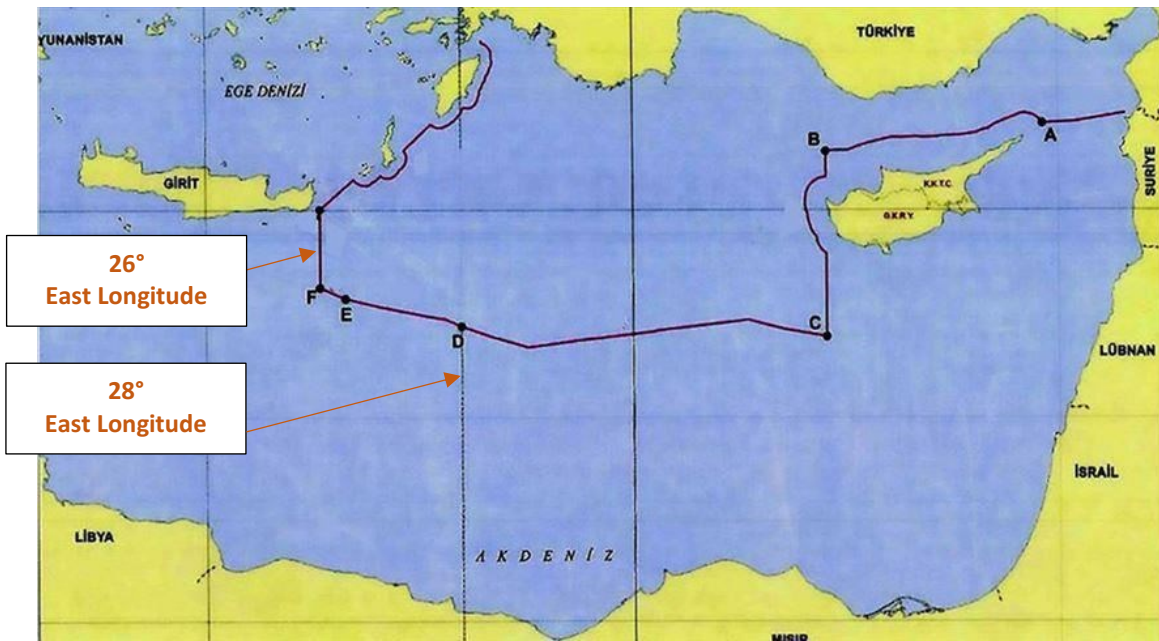
in Misrata region, so it is not in Turkey's interest to have instability. It is an interests-based convergence. Also, excellent location to have a naval base in Misrata to protect our maritime interests from afar" (Kutluk int 2021). Therefore, "the MFA felt compelled to convert the dashed [maritime border] line to a solid line in our depiction of Turkish continental shelf area," adds a senior Turkish diplomat (SDS-1 int 2021). As a reflection of perceived successes of military victories in Syria, the political impetus began to shift from pursuing this solely through diplomatic means toward establishing "facts on the ground and negotiating from a position of strength" (Stein 2021b). Under the bilateral defense partnership with Libya, Turkey provided vital military assistance to the Tripoli-based GNA to halt the Tobruk-based warlord Khalifa Hafter's assault and recovered government control over roughly the western half of the country. Thanks in large part to Turkish drones and military advisors, this was a remarkable achievement against the coalition between Egypt and the UAE which had to reach a shaky cease-fire with Turkey along the Sirte-Al-Jafra line.¹⁰¹

Considering Turkey's exclusion from the regional security architecture as explained earlier, it was Ankara's deliberate decision to move the broader conflict over Cyprus and Libya into the Eastern Mediterranean. Blue Homeland is not merely a spillover effect of the political division in Cyprus, but a lot of the momentum behind it is related to the Cyprus imbroglio. "Our maritime presence is an instrument of coercion during a crisis with Greece. The main reason why we did the Libya MoU was to show our teeth to Athens," says a former Turkish diplomat (FTD int 2021). Both Greece and Turkey had their irreconcilable views, yet up until the Libya MoU neither side was eager to advance the claims that it had made in the area to a formal declaration. In a dramatic

¹⁰¹ "Turkey acts as a disruptor," says Ünlühisarcıklı, "It could not set its own terms in Syria but managed to upend the game in there – Rojava is no longer viable. I have not heard of the word 'Rojava' since last year (2020)" (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021). Likewise in Libya, it upended Hafter's assault and managed to prevent it from taking power.

step, Turkey pre-emptively signed an MoU for maritime demarcation with the GNA in Libya on November 27th and submitted an updated map of its CS/EEZ to the UN on November 28th, 2019 (Figure 43 below) (Çavuşoğlu and Sıyala 2019). Many countries in the EMGF and the EU protested Turkey’s move and claimed it as “illegal,” but the UN General Secretariat verified the EEZ deal between two internationally recognized governments.

Figure 43: Turkey’s CS/EEZ Declaration to the UN, 2019



Source: Turkish MFA, 2019-2020. Points E-F are the maritime boundary between Turkey and Libya.

The map shows that Turkey’s CS/EEZ boundary extended westward from the 28° East Longitude to the 26° East Longitude.¹⁰² This was Ankara’s boldest step ever since the 1974 Cyprus Operation. On the wave of celebrations, Gürdeniz penned an article for Doğu Perinçek’s *Aydınlık* newspaper, in reference to an Ottoman admiral (*Turgut Reis*), who died in action during the siege of Malta (1565) and is buried in Tripoli. He allegorized the MoU to the re-union with a part of the historic homeland: “For Blue Homeland, the tomb of *Turgut Reis* in Libya is the maritime

¹⁰² The architect of the deal, Admiral (Ret.) Cihat Yaycı, became a highly popular persona in Turkey and expectedly received harsh criticism in Greece. He quickly published three books on the Eastern Mediterranean/Aegean maritime issues and became a close advisor to Erdoğan until May 2020.

equivalent of the tomb of *Süleyman Şah* in Syria” (Gürdeniz 2019b). Asked for clarification, he said “these [lands] are not part of our Blue Homeland. Our military partnership with Libya can only have an indirect affect on it” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). Quoting Turkish-Islamic legacy, Erdoğan has other opinions: “We are here in Libya to fulfill a historic responsibility to our brothers/sisters” (Tziarras int 2021) and a former Turkish diplomat does not deny the connection: “Libyan government asked for our help to fight against rival groups and we just met their request” (FTD int 2021).

Turkey acted swiftly to assert its maritime interests and to pre-empt the rival alliance by signing an MoU with the GNA in Libya in November 2019. However, it over-balanced its challengers through occasionally abrupt maneuvers. For instance, “Libya agreement in standalone is rather peculiar,” says an interviewed expert, “Turkey should have negotiated and mended ties with Egypt and Israel before drawing maritime borders with Libya” (Ünal int 2021). Also, Yaycı’s version of the *Mavi Vatan* map shows Turkey-Israel/Palestine and Turkey-Lebanon maritime boundaries, which are maximalist claims that have little to no chance to be fulfilled. Karan makes another controversial claim that Blue Homeland goes beyond Turkish domains: “If, for instance, Libya or Somalia grants TPAO a license for oil/gas drilling in their own EEZ, the area designated for exploration becomes part of our Blue Homeland” (Karan int 2021). This goes much beyond the national maritime periphery. Instead, many people prefer to label Gürdeniz as a hard-liner dogmatist, “but this is not true,” say experts such as İpek and Gülay, “he is not a maximalist person, he is sincere and intelligent; does not have a fanaticized approach like Greeks saying ‘we have the EU behind us, we can claim anything we want’, but a practical, flexible approach open to negotiations” (Gülay int 2021; İpek int 2021). It was mainly the AKP that used an “overly aggressive rhetoric and alienated its allies,” like in the S-400 deal, adds Ülgen (Ülgen int 2021).

As a peninsular country Turkey must have a maritime policy, one way or the other, and this should not be interpreted as out of the ordinary. The main factor is how this policy is formulated and applied, and this is where Turkey got trapped and found itself in an up-hill struggle after 2019. “Turkey is right on certain issues like the status of islands and maritime zones, but because it has an aggressive approach to foreign policy, its language and attitude put it on a difficult spot,” says an expert in Washington, “therefore, third parties and observers in Washington DC believe it is an expansionist policy. It becomes an inefficient policy to pursue” (TBE int 2021). This sounds nice and simple in hindsight, but Turkey’s interlocutors have shown no flexibility when it comes to creating positive-sum solutions to long-standing disputes either. The real problem is the shadow of the AKP’s former period, 2010-2016, and authoritarian practices thereafter, which cast a heavy burden on Turkey’s foreign relations. Mismanagement, frequent U-turns, political intrigues, and ideological divisions under the AKP/Erdoğan’s impulsive leadership left a huge baggage dragging down Turkey’s image in abroad. Even the rightest cause looks like a hegemonic ambition.¹⁰³ Part of the confusion comes from “Erdoğan’s very rigid commitment to certain issues and his total flexibility on others that he can use as bargaining chips,” according to Selim Sazak, research director at TUM Strategy in Ankara (Wilks 2021).

The impact of the Turkey-Libya MoU was felt most acutely in Greece. On the other side of the Aegean, “the [perceived] suddenness with which Turkey acted in contested territories upped the level of alarm in Greece” (Danforth int 2021). The Greek view shifted from “Turkey is like in the 90s” to “Turkey hit and run in the 90s, but now it hits and stays there” (Tziarras int 2021). Some

¹⁰³ “France criticized Turkey for expansionism, but it has its own post-colonial zones of influence and interests in Africa. Of 26 Francophone African countries, 20 have near-colonial relationship with France,” says Kutluk, “We have cultural ties and trade links there. Turkey can become a regional power but not a colonialist” (Kutluk int 2021). “Turkey cut through France’s sphere of influence in Libya, Syria, and Caucasus,” adds a senior Turkish diplomat, “that’s why they are angry at us” (SDS-1 int 2021).

interviewees like Grigoriadis see a positive side to it for Athens: The MoU with Libya “benefitted Greece in that it turned the international public opinion against Turkey” (Grigoriadis int 2021). Geopolitically, Tziarras adds, “it appeared like Libya is a bridgehead to Africa, it’s a steppingstone like Cyprus to go further and connect the dots from the Horn of Africa to Niger and North Africa; they mutually support each other with Blue Homeland” (Tziarras int 2021). This is the “ultimate evidence of Erdoğan’s revisionism,” says an interviewee, “a land grab,” says another, or “an attempt to undermine the Lausanne Treaty” (Ifantis int 2021; Grigoriadis int 2021; Filis int 2021). Greek observers say that no Turkish official dared to say in public that Lausanne Treaty needs to be revised, until Erdoğan. “He brought it at an official visit to Athens in 2017;” they iterate: “This was the first alarm to us. He wants to prevail over *Kemal* as the new Atatürk” (Filis int 2021; Karagiannis int 2021). After four years, Erdoğan spoke of “building a powerful and big Turkey” on Turkish media in September 2021 (Erdoğan 2021), raising further suspicion in Athens of his mixed motives. Therefore, Greek respondents say, “we felt that the only way to ameliorate the disparity is to try to modernize our capabilities, it is a survival strategy; we had to send a crystal-clear message to Turkey that any conflict with Greece will come at a very high cost for it” (Ifantis int 2021; Filis int 2021; Karagiannis int 2021). Karagiannis identifies himself as a hardliner and a representative of the realist school of thought, arguing that “there are people from the left in Greece; they are constructivists, and say, ‘Greece has been a bit paranoid about it’,” and he adds “I am not one of them as unobjective as it may be” (Karagiannis int 2021). Heraclides is one such scholar who applies a constructivist approach and disagrees with Karagiannis: “Greece can benefit from it if Turkey becomes more engaged with maritime development. Our safety net is economics. Turkey wants its legitimate interests satisfied; it is not after land-grabbing. We can have joint-development areas for oil/gas in the CS” (Heraclides int 2021). In essence, most of the interviewees

in Greece see Turkey's actions as aggressive and threatening, and highlight that this is the "dominant view among people" (Heraclides int 2021).

These conflicting views from both sides show that the quest to increase their own security creates anxiety in Greece and Turkey, and therefore leaves them less secure. The observed outcome is an intensifying, mixed-motive security dilemma that leads to fear, produces tit-for-tat behavior, and creates a spiraling of the regional arms race. Tensions around energy exploration to the east of nearby Greek islands demonstrate that avenues for cooperation between Greece and Turkey are either negligible or costly in comparison to pursuit of isolated national interests. Both states claim to abide by the status-quo but maintain aggressive military postures, which makes discerning each of their real intentions difficult. They see each other as a threat to the current equilibrium but fail to examine the implications of their own actions on the other. This vicious cycle of aggression begets fear, suspicion, and distrust, culminating in further hostilities. In seeking security through an arms race, both sides upset the sense of security in the other. "I think neither Turkey nor Greece harbor offensive intentions and are not actively seeking a confrontation," says Mevlütoğlu, "but also both try to maximize security and have interests in escalating tensions to press their claims" (Mevlütoğlu int 2021). This spiral constitutes the basis of the "security dilemma" (Jervis 1977, 66–67) between them, a tragedy of creating a menace that security measures were designed to ward off. The incentive to cheat the other in pursuit of narrow self-interests, a classic prisoner's dilemma outcome, leaves both sides worse in the end. It appears that they adopt defensive doctrines but employ offensive strategies time to time. The situation represents a "doubly dangerous" scenario, whereby each side regards an offensive strategy as advantageous, and an offensive posture is indistinguishable from a defensive one due to misperceptions (Cheon 2020). This bleak

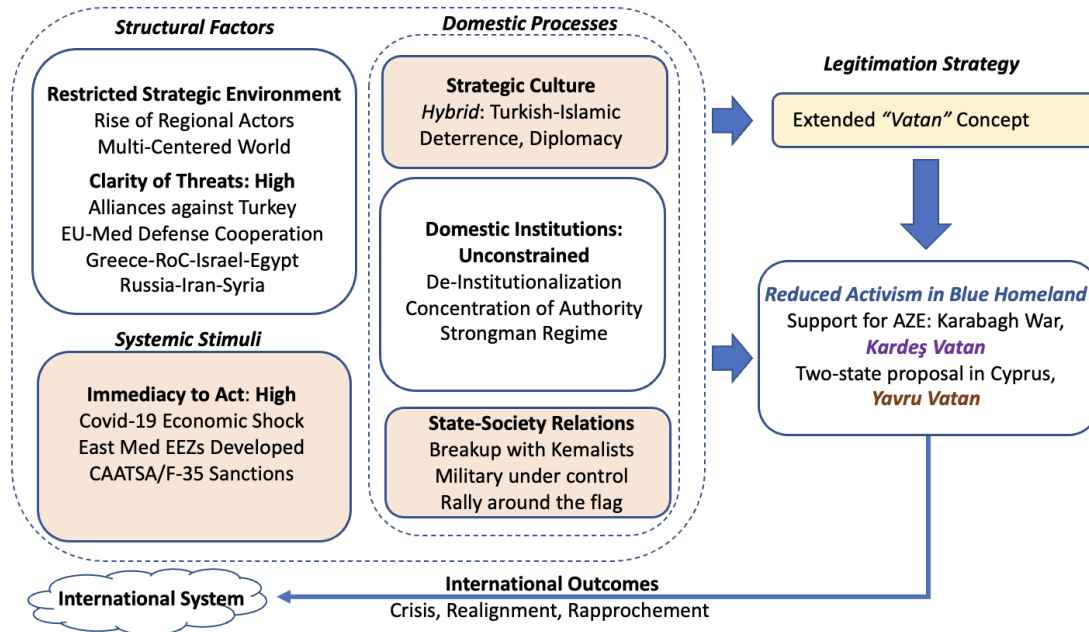
picture took both sides into 2020, to the brink of war, and ushered in diplomatic intervention from both the US and the EU to calm tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

3.6. Foreign Policy Realignment and Softening of the “Blue Homeland” Narrative

It is important to explore in this section why Turkey softened its Blue Homeland policy after a hot summer with Greece in 2020 and adopted a more conciliatory approach to its relations with the neighborhood. On top of the geopolitical hurdles of 2019, there were systemic stimuli and domestic challenges that prompted Turkey to re-evaluate its Blue Homeland policy. Within a more restricted strategic environment, Ankara was fighting an up-hill battle to sustain a high-pitch confrontational posture in overseas military engagements. The COVID-19-induced economic downturn increased the public’s questioning of foreign military campaigns such as in Libya (Dalay 2020) and observers began to criticize the AKP’s combative rhetoric against Egypt, Israel, and the UAE. As countries battled with the pandemic and faced up to rising geopolitical tensions, governments everywhere were switching from the pursuit of efficiency to a new mantra of resilience and self-reliance (The Economist 2021a). If the main concern in the pre-COVID era was to take risks for growth, the overwhelming impetus in the COVID-19 era is to reduce uncertainty. Turkey was one of those regional powers vying for “sovereign autonomy” (The World Bank 2020) and seeking to increase its crisis agility while battling with a severe economic downturn. The government expedited development of a military-industry-media complex, a world-class healthcare system, and digitalization of the education system to take advantage of the changing economic and strategic landscape. However, it was becoming difficult to sustain a militarized foreign policy that exacerbated Turkey’s regional isolation and impacted its economy. The analytical framework in Figure 44 below shows that Ankara’s backtrack from Blue Homeland activism was due to the breakup of the logrolled coalition between the AKP and Kemalists,

emergence of a hybrid strategic culture with more Islamist elements than nationalism, and systemic stimuli including the COVID-19-induced economic crisis and western sanctions on Turkey.

Figure 44: Turkish Foreign Policy, 2020-2021



The combination of structural and domestic factors, as well as systemic stimuli necessitated a slow but decisive realignment in the logrolled coalition and the AKP’s foreign policy priorities. On the domestic front, the first sign of the power re-shuffle in Ankara’s bureaucratic corridors was Cihat Yaycı’s abrupt resignation from the navy in May 2020. Yaycı was allegedly the only military officer who could meet with Erdoğan without an appointment, and he was a popular man. Erdoğan mentioned him by name at the commissioning ceremony of a Turkish submarine, *TCG Piri Reis*, and thanked him personally for his contribution to the MoU deal with Libya (Erdoğan 2019). Yaycı actively promoted himself on media and gave interviews to prominent journalists, which was unusual in the strict hierarchy of the defense establishment. Some Kemalist former-bureaucrats such as Ahmet Zeki Üçok claimed that Yaycı’s active profile raised some eyebrows and brought him under the spotlight of an increasingly uncomfortable land-based/army elite in Ankara (odatv4.com 2020). There were powerful people unhappy with the influential Kemalist clique

close to Yaycı and the navy's larger role in Turkey's security architecture. Upon rumors of a corruption investigation, the MoD demoted Yaycı to a passive role at the command HQ, upon which he precipitously resigned from active duty.¹⁰⁴ This event was the apex of the Islamist-Kemalist logrolled coalition that started in 2015. Retired naval officers lost a major proponent of their Blue Homeland vision while their precarious co-existence with the AKP began to show signs of wearing out.

Yaycı's demotion had a negative impact on Blue Homeland's popular appeal among the public and divided the Kemalist-ulusalcı/Eurasianist camp into two factions vying for political influence. Doğu Perinçek's *ulusalcı*-Eurasianist *Aydınlık* media group switched sides to support Erdoğan/AKP and defamed Yaycı upon claims by his Kemalist supporters that Turkey's maritime interests are at stake. Gürdeniz left his weekly column at the *Aydınlık* group and moved to *Veryansın TV* to continue his talks. This did not impact Gürdeniz's ideas and political stance, however, because "*Veryansın TV* feels just like *Aydınlık* without Perinçek," says Gingeras, "You take Perinçek away, and *Veryansın TV* is still a kind of left of center Kemalism and it has a lot of *ulusalcı* straights to it, but without the iconography of *Aydınlık*" (Gingeras int 2021). After his resignation, Yaycı also capitulated to the AKP/Erdoğan-Perinçek group and offered lip service to their policies on media until the end of 2021.¹⁰⁵ After the maritime MoU with Libya in 2019 and Yaycı's resignation in 2020, Kemalist progenitors of Blue Homeland came under pressure both from within (domestic politics) and outside (rival alliances). They were on the look for a way out that could offer them a platform without the overbearing burden of the AKP's political maneuvers.

¹⁰⁴ Kemalists pointed out that the MoD's demotion of Yaycı happened on May 15, 2020, the anniversary of the Greek invasion of İzmir in 1919. They claimed that it was not a coincidence, but a part of a larger conspiracy by the Euro-Atlantic alliance and Gülenists to overthrow Kemalists, obliterate the Blue Homeland strategy, and subdue the Turkish state.

¹⁰⁵ Yaycı setup a think-tank at Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul called "Turkish Center for Maritime and Global Strategies" (BAU TEGS) but he got dismissed after a year by the management. He dropped from the political scene and lost the popular appeal he enjoyed during the height of the Blue Homeland narrative during 2019-2020. He is now the Director of ASAM Turkish Maritime Strategy and Security Center in Istanbul.

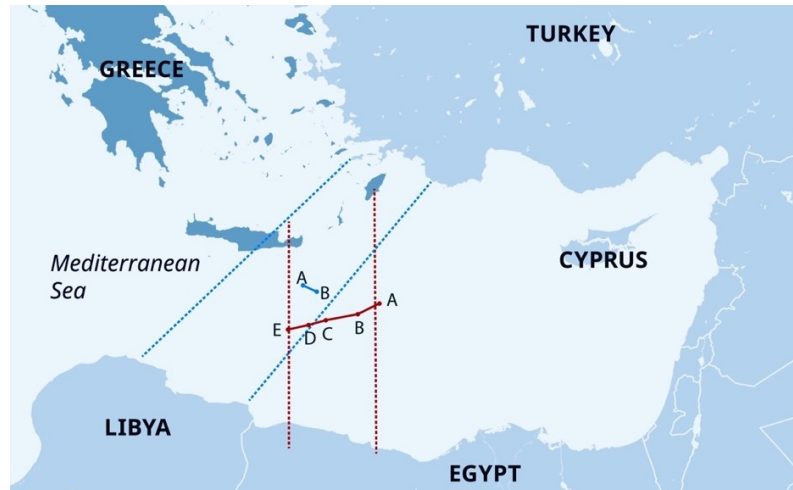
Apart from this tense domestic atmosphere, confrontations in the Eastern Mediterranean reached a peak point in the summer of 2020. Turkey dispatched *Oruç Reis* seismic research vessel to conduct exploration in its CS contested with Greece. The two countries came to the brink of war when a Turkish frigate *TCG Kemalreis* escorting *Oruç Reis* collided with the Greek *HS Lemnos* on the west of Cyprus.¹⁰⁶ Only the US-German joint shuttle diplomacy averted a catastrophic eventuality, but both sides continued to take escalatory steps in the diplomatic scene. By the end of the summer, what started in 2016 as a broader initiative to raise Turkey's maritime consciousness and reinforce regional presence turned into a complex puzzle in the familiar dynamic of Greek-Turkish disputes over sovereign rights. Ankara submitted a note to the UN General Secretariat calling Greece to abide by the demilitarized status of the Aegean islands as per the articles of Lausanne and Paris treaties. Upon pressure from Washington, in a tit-for-tat move against Turkey-Libya MoU, Greece also signed a delimitation agreement with Egypt in September 2020, which Turkey considered null and void (Figure 45 below). Confrontations then took a wider turn when Turkish and French frigates involved in a cat-and-mouse game over patrolling Libyan waters bullied each other and a German frigate intervened on a Turkish cargo ship *Rosalina-A* allegedly carrying arms to the UN-sanctioned Libyan government in November 2020.¹⁰⁷ In the end, under the threat of economic sanctions by the EU, Ankara decided to tone down its aggressive pursuit for oil/gas in the Eastern Mediterranean and withdrew *Oruç Reis* to Antalya Bay as a show of goodwill. Greece pressured the EU to adopt sanctions on Turkey, but the union deferred the decision to March 2021, offering Ankara one more chance to re-assess its position. Thus, by the

¹⁰⁶ *HS Lemnos* rammed *TCG Kemalreis* on the starboard aft side, which did not leave a serious damage and *Kemalreis* soon returned to duty. In alleged retaliation, Turkish drones paint-bombed a Greek flag carved on a hilltop on the tiny island of Kastellorizo, located under less than a mile from the Turkish coast (Günaydın 2020).

¹⁰⁷ It would be illegal to stop and search a ship without explicit consent of the flag-bearer state (Turkey), but authorities of the EU naval mission IRINI headed by a Greek commander claimed that the Turkish MFA did not respond to their request for search on time (not that it had to, anyway).

end of 2020, all Turkish hydrocarbon drilling activity in the Mediterranean had ceased and the TPAO shifted its offshore energy exploration to the Black Sea.

Figure 45: Greece-Egypt vs Turkey-Libya CS/EEZ Agreements, 2019-2020



Source: DW, 2020. Blue A-B line: Turkey-Libya EEZ boundary, Red A-E Line: Greece-Egypt EEZ boundary

After the maritime crisis in the summer of 2020, there were mixed opinions and curiosities among Turkish analysts about why Turkey backtracked from its combative stance in Blue Homeland. "Other than a few exceptions, the Turkish intelligentsia did not embrace the Blue Homeland concept anyway," says Gülay, "that's a key reason behind failure of its international recognition" (Gülay int 2021). This does not mean that Ankara has taken a hands-off approach toward the Eastern Mediterranean, or that it has dropped its assertive maritime policy, but a re-evaluation of its application was due. "Turkey's maritime policy is not just about energy; even if there wasn't one m³ of gas, Turkey would still follow it," says a senior Turkish diplomat (SDS-1 int 2021), emphasizing that energy is not a causal factor in Blue Homeland's applicability. Mehmet Şahin, an influential academic in Ankara, confirms that, according to his meetings with officials at the Ministry of Energy, Turkey's pause of exploratory drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean is "a tactical retreat to appease the EU and avoid economic sanctions in the short-term" (M. Şahin 2021). Interviewed experts say that Turkey had reached a dead-end, a deadlock with all countries,

and needed a conjectural re-alignment, quoting the British politician Lord Palmerston's famous phrase "we have no permanent allies or enemies, only interests" (Ünver Noi int 2021). Since the end of 2020, Turkey has taken a more nuanced position between the Euro-Atlantic/NATO alliance and the Eurasian world to achieve its geopolitical goals, only one of which is about maritime interests. Based on the lessons of the 2010-2016 era and seeing the risk of "strategic exposure, self-encirclement, and overextension" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 69), Erdoğan does not want to become politically trapped by the rhetoric of *Mavi Vatan*; instead, he wants to utilize it for his own political reasons, if/when necessary. Therefore, issue-based, transactional partnerships in regional, localized conflicts became increasingly the new norm. In this context, five events/updates in domestic and foreign spheres factored into Ankara's calculus that allowed a re-calibration of the maritime strategy in 2021.

First, Erdoğan visited Cyprus in November 2020 to hold a joint meeting with the nationalist new President Ersin Tatar and formally announced that, after many rounds of failed negotiations, Turkey no longer supports a federal solution but a two-state solution. This reflects the public mood in Turkey that has turned starkly against a compromise solution in Cyprus after repeated failures of talks. According to Kadir Has University's poll in 2020, majority of Turkish people (55%+) view Cyprus as the most important sticking point in Greek-Turkish relations and prefer an outright annexation of North Cyprus into Turkey let alone emergence of two separate states on the island (Aydın 2020, 60, 63). "There is no enthusiasm on the Turkish Cypriot side to rush for a settlement either," adds Aydın-Düzgit (Aydın-Düzgit int 2021). Instead of remaining committed to a unified solution under the auspice of the EU, Turkey promoted TRNC's recognition and closer relations between Turkish Cypriots and Eurasian Turkic states under the AKP-MHP's nationalist coalition.

Power consolidation in North Cyprus strengthened the AKP's hand and opened space for flexibility on Blue Homeland.

Second, Turkey assisted Azerbaijan to reclaim Nagorno-Karabagh from Armenia in November 2020 and, for the first time in over a hundred years, the Turkish army re-entered Southern Caucasus through a joint peace-observation mission with Russia. The flamboyant military parade and developing economic relations with Baku allowed Turkey to re-position itself as a bridge between the Mediterranean world (Cyprus) and the Caucasus (Azerbaijan) under the banner of "*üç devlet, tek millet*" (three states, one nation). Though it did not change realities on the ground regarding Cyprus, it nonetheless shifted the rhetoric to re-celebration of *Yavru Vatan* and *Kardeş Vatan* narratives by promoting national solidarity and defiance against Western conspiracies. The AKP needed a new success story amid the deadlock in the Eastern Mediterranean and mounting pressure of the COVID-19 crisis. As soon as the government "supplanted maritime activism with the victory in Caucasus and re-assertion of independence in Cyprus, it no longer needed *Mavi Vatan*, and that created an opening for reproachment with the West" (Çelikpala 2021).

Third, the outgoing Trump administration oversaw the Abraham Accords in September 2020 between Israel, UAE, and Bahrain as part of Washington's transformational peace plan of the century. The agreement positioned Israel side by side with Egypt as the two pivot countries pushing regional efforts to construct new avenues for cooperation in energy, finance, and defense. Abraham Accords also strengthened the *de facto* alliance in the EMGF and pushed Turkey's influence further to the margins. "It is as much a bulwark against Turkey as it is against Iran," writes Vali Nasr, arguing that "the driving force in the Middle East is no longer ideology or religion but old-fashioned *realpolitik*" (Nasr 2021). Some even argued that Abraham Accords is a "US-led maritime security coalition against Iran, Turkey, and China" (Hussain 2020). With the Muslim

Brotherhood weakened and facing a collapse of the Arab Uprising, Ankara wanted to reduce tensions in a pragmatic way and reset its regional ties. Also facing a severe economic crisis amid a tumbling lira, Turkish officials were scrambling to expand ties with friends and foes alike, from Qatar to the UAE and Israel to Saudi Arabia. “Unless you are a runner-up superpower like China, you cannot dictate your terms on others, it must be done through multilateral diplomacy,” says a former Turkish diplomat (FTD int 2021). This would enable Turkey to capitalize on a legitimate, multilateral framework for security in the Eastern Mediterranean instead of being branded as a spoiler. Since the AKP’s goal is to “attract investment, return to economic growth, and re-build the voter base to win the 2023 elections” (Outzen and Çağaptay 2022), these fence-mending efforts require smart power compelling more focus on economic relations and bridge-building rather than military posturing like Blue Homeland.

Fourth, Joe Biden’s election to US presidency in November 2020 ended Erdoğan’s personal deal-making scheme with Washington and signaled a downward spiral in the US-Turkey bilateral relationship. “Biden decided to cooperate with the EU and form a joint front against the AKP. Until his election, Turkey defied the West and reapproached with Russia militarily and looked for opportunities to do so with China economically,” say interviewed experts, “This tacit coalition became unsustainable when the government began to look for ways to appease Biden. There, a frequency mismatch between the two stakeholders, the AKP and Blue Homeland supporters, became discernible” (Ünlühisarcıklı int 2021; Ünver Noi int 2021; Aydın-Düzgit int 2021). The US government intends to increase its naval presence amid rising tensions over disputed regions of Ukraine, which elevates Turkish Straits and maritime zones in importance. Here, Erdoğan sees a way to guarantee his political survival through transactional ties with US President Joe Biden by lending support to Ukraine and NATO’s positioning against Russia. A key reason underlying

Ankara's effort to mend fences and court favor with Washington is to overcome CAATSA sanctions, because shares of the US and European suppliers in Turkish defense industry's imports reaches up to 83% depending on the service branch (Gürcan 2021; Tekin 2021). Turkey sent a formal request to the US Department of Defense (DoD) to upgrade its aging fleet of F-16s to the Block-70 (Viper) model and to maintain the edge on skies against an aggressive Greece and a revisionist Russia.¹⁰⁸ Çağaptay says, "The US wants to leave a door open so that Turkey could – once again – be part of the Eastern Mediterranean security architecture as a building block" (Çağaptay 2021). The AKP saw that Blue Homeland is a competing narrative that puts Kemalism at the center of foreign policy and jeopardizes such deal-making with the US/NATO, and therefore decided to take it under control.

Lastly, the changing energy landscape and Washington's commitment to clean energy goals factored into Ankara's political calculus for the economic utility of hydrocarbon extraction in the maritime domain. Turkey's exploratory drills in the Eastern Mediterranean have not borne positive results despite trial runs in multiple locations around Cyprus. But in 2020-2021, Turkey made a breakthrough that shifted its focus to the Black Sea. During the height of Greek-Turkish tensions in the Mediterranean, TPAO announced in August 2020 discovery of 320 bcm of natural gas in Tuna-1 field, 83 miles off the coast of *Sakarya* on the Black Sea coast. An additional discovery of 85 bcm in October 2020, and a further 135 bcm in June 2021, increased the total size of the deposit to 540 bcm (Erkul Kaya 2021b; Çubukçuoğlu 2020b), putting Turkey among top European nations

¹⁰⁸ To showcase Turkey's pivotal role, Erdoğan spoke about buying higher-end weapons systems from Russia if the US refuses Turkey's request to upgrade its F-16 fleet. Some speculate that one of these areas of cooperation would be nuclear submarine technology under Turkey's indigenous submarine-building program (MILDEN). Diesel-electric submarines are highly affective for A2/AD in coastal waters, but even one or two vessels with nuclear-propulsion can be "game changers" and control the entire East Med (Baybaş 2021). This would be a strategic and psychological deterrent (Baybaş 2021). Russia's *Rosatom* is building Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Mersin-Akkuyu that is expected to meet 10% of the country's electricity demand by 2026.

in the offshore energy field. The key point about access to offshore energy is that the amount of gas in the Black Sea deposit is larger than most reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean and is roughly equivalent to Greek Cypriot findings to date all combined – so, with one strike, Turkey matched the RoC’s discoveries. The AKP government has set an ambitious goal to productionize the field in 2023, by the republic’s centennial anniversary, the net impact of which would be to reduce Turkey’s energy dependence on Russia and Iran. By comparison, Eastern Mediterranean gas is expensive to produce and faces many up-hill hurdles not the least of which is political risk. Political hurdles aside, “potential markets for the Mediterranean gas are saturated,” adds Ögütçü, “Turkey does not have market slack to absorb it either; it already has plenty of mid-to-long term supply contracts with Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia, and even perhaps Iraqi KRG in future” (Ögütçü int 2021), not to mention the Black Sea gas.

Turkey has focused its attention for offshore drilling on the Black Sea since 2020, while its quest to tap into offshore energy deposits in the Mediterranean turned out to be more about geopolitical posturing, desire for status, and national prestige than economic rationality. Contrary to popular conviction, Ankara is no longer interested in taking a confrontational approach purely for offshore energy rights in disputed zones around Cyprus. As Tziarras highlights, “it is not about energy, it is about sovereignty” (Tziarras int 2021). Turkey’s presence there is mainly about maritime control; “the main goal is not to discover, extract, and exploit resources but to establish state practices over our sovereign rights” (Ögütçü int 2021; Karan int 2021), and Gürdeniz agrees: “Oil/gas may become obsolete in the next thirty to forty years. Yet our geopolitical axis in the south remains permanent” (Gürdeniz int 2021b). With a bleak future for hydrocarbons in the energy mix, as well as high costs against a looming potential supply glut by 2024-25, other experts go even further to suggest that frictions over Eastern Mediterranean oil and gas are an “outdated

discussion” (Rabinowitz 2021). Therefore, the AKP began to emphasize economy-focused pragmatism in Blue Homeland rather than military-focused activism.

3.7. De-prioritization of Blue Homeland, The Admirals’ Letter Incident, and Black Sea Geopolitics

In the context of Ankara’s de-prioritization of Blue Homeland activism, this section provides a re-assessment of why 104 retired admirals issued a controversial open letter of criticism in April 2021 against the AKP’s alleged plan to abolish the Montreux Convention and alter the regime of the Turkish Straits. By March 2021, Turkey had significantly toned down its combative stance in the Eastern Mediterranean and expressed its support for a “cooperation mechanism” between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots on oil/gas exploration, and “an inclusive East Med Conference” (SDS-2 int 2021) on these issues. Overall, the AKP saw only diminishing returns to insist on a confrontational policy in the Mediterranean and agreed to settle on a shaky *détente* than drag on with perpetual hostility. Between 2019-2021, “Turkey maximized a backlash from other countries in the region for relatively minimal concrete security gains” (Danforth int 2021), because “gunboat diplomacy is an effective instrument to some degree but a risky strategy with only marginal returns,” says Ünver Noi (Ünver Noi int 2021). Official backtracking from Blue Homeland would have “raised the ire of nationalists within the population and the elite”¹⁰⁹ (Johnston 2013, 19), but over-commitment would also be detrimental: “The rhetoric might enslave Turkey and hinder its ability to negotiate,” adds Ülgen (Ülgen int 2021) while Admiral (Ret.) Türker Ertürk agrees that to insist on Blue Homeland as is would leave no option but to “either go to international court or war” (Ertürk 2021). In diplomacy, senior Turkish diplomats say, “we adopt a ‘wait and see’ approach time to time,” and “on state practices, you don’t have to make a point

¹⁰⁹ Gülay claims that “Due to the public awareness and pressure campaign on social media, the AKP could not completely abandon the Blue Homeland rhetoric [but rather turned the narrative to its advantage]” (Gülay int 2021). However, the impact of social media on foreign policy decision-making is another topic and out of this thesis’ scope. To deduce a causal link between social media sentiment about Blue Homeland and government policy decisions requires empirical evidence.

every day,” referring to unsustainable nature of the 24/7, constant-crisis mode (SDS-1 int 2021; Apakan int 2021). There are different opinions in the MFA, among academics, and political parties (İpek int 2021), and not everyone supports the policy of tuning the intensity of Blue Homeland policy however: “For a country in Turkey’s position, caliber, and reach, there is no precedent elsewhere of such a regressive mode,” says Gülay (Gülay int 2021).

Turkey was walking a tight rope by 2021, because the Libyan Parliament has not yet ratified the maritime MoU and, despite all the rhetoric, Ankara did not send any seismic research vessel to the area near Greek islands, between 26° and 28° East Longitudes (Kıyat int 2021). These facts put doubt on its real intentions. “The fact that Turkey has not drilled there confirms the point that Ankara keeps it as a trump card to leverage during negotiations,” says Grigoriadis (Grigoriadis int 2021), and Gingeras adds, “That all can change again tomorrow if for whatever reason Turkey sees less risk in dialing up the rhetoric” (Gingeras int 2021). Some retired admirals such as Gürdeniz, Sağdıç, and Kıyat interpreted this softening as retrenchment (and defeat) in their quest to assert maritime rights and claim a larger role for the navy. Others like Kutluk disagree: “Why should we rush? Time will come for it. *Oruç Reis* vessel is an incredible leverage in Turkey’s hand; it controls the entire EU/Greek policy; that’s a huge advantage. When to deploy it is a matter of what Turkey’s foreign policy requirements/priorities are. Fact that it has not is not a sign of step-back or downgrade in policy” (Kutluk int 2021). Kutluk has a point that oil companies (IOCs) conduct seismic research only in most probable areas (10%+ chances), since these are costly operations. If TPAO has seismic data and knows the region’s energy potential, or lack thereof, then there is no need to waste resources just for muscle flexing. But other admirals have a point, too. The government sends wrong signals by its abrupt moves and appears weak/vulnerable under external pressure. If the AKP is serious about executing a maritime strategy, it should have

calculated all possibilities at the outset and either continue the act with resolve or not start at all. As Kıyat puts it, “If this is a table with four legs and one of them is weak, like the Turkish economy today, or if presidential decrees destroyed our thousand-year-old cultural memory and military traditions, we cannot defend our rights in diplomatic arena without the backing of national power” (Kıyat int 2021). Now, “many people hesitate to even mention the phrase *Mavi Vatan* among government circles due to political sensitivity of the subject,” adds a senior Turkish naval officer (TN-2 int 2021). Combined with radical changes like the lifting of the headscarf ban in the army and appearance of an on-duty admiral wearing a robe in a dervish lodge, Kıyat’s testament supports the idea that the government tries to modify the strategic culture in a way that suits its political agenda, in more Islamic and less nationalist terms.

The status-quo of tensions in 2019-2020 was a lose-lose situation for everyone, mostly Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus, but to sweep them under the carpet does not offer a long-term alternative either. Their underlying interests have not changed. Looping back to the five-decades-old tried-and-failed practice, all sides re-started exploratory talks/negotiations on the Aegean and UN-mediated talks in Cyprus, yet reports tell that it is mainly window-dressing and there is anything but a reconciliation in sight: “There is no appetite, no mood for negotiations with Turkey,” says Karagiannis (Karagiannis int 2021). Also, “studies of strategic culture show that it is very difficult to reverse a geopolitical *fait accompli* that is so serious, e.g., the Libya MoU,” adds Tziarras (Tziarras int 2021). Also, de-confliction mechanism at NATO only scratches at the surface: “Officials from MFAs and MoDs meet at tactical/technical level with the sole aim is to prevent clashes, not escalations. There are no maps on the table, and it is a zero-sum game. It just gives the parties a platform to blow off steam and relatively neutral space to talk in the moderating presence of others,” add experts (TN-1 int 2021; “Crisis Group: Turkey-Greece” 2021). Although

maritime tensions have abated since 2021, there is no incentive on either side to back down from their claims (Karagiannis int 2021; Klapsis int 2021). Essentially, Greece and Turkey are unwilling to go to war to test the power distribution, so they “reached a stalemate after crisis, posturing and signaling until a new perceived shift [in power] leads to another round” (Rose 1998, 159). As pessimistic as it may sound, “I do not see a way out; I think we are beyond the point to expect positive developments,” adds Karagiannis (Karagiannis int 2021). Some cynics like Edward Luttwak even say “give peace a chance, give war a chance,” arguing that sometimes war is the least bad option (Heraclides int 2021; Ünal int 2021; Luttwak 2009). Therefore, most interviewed experts believe that Ankara’s downgrade of Blue Homeland’s activism is not a strategic retreat but a tactical shift.

The research conducted for this thesis finds that it was under these wider set of concerns that the 104 admirals submitted the controversial open letter in April 2021. “Some of these officers have quite contrary ideas about the direction of Turkish foreign policy and their influence in media becomes a problem,” says Gingeras (Gingeras int 2021). From their perspective, the AKP/Erdoğan’s inclination to support NATO’s strategy to expand its presence in the Black Sea was the final straw in a series of escalations and retrenchments that put Turkey in a precarious situation. Since large ships are of little value in a small, enclosed area like the Black Sea, and foreign aircraft carriers are prohibited under the Montreux Convention, NATO demands Turkey to put forward its own submarines for A2/AD missions. Amid the war in Ukraine, Turkey is treading a fine line of balance between NATO and Moscow and any strategic shift to engage with Russia in an unstable Black Sea would take away from Turkey’s commitment to “blue waters” in the Aegean/Eastern Mediterranean. In February 2021, former SACEUR Commander Gen. (Ret.) Philip Breedlove suggested Turkey to lead a NATO standing naval task force in the Black Sea to

demonstrate its leadership; this would be a “confidence-building measure,” he said (Breedlove (Ret.) 2021). Clearly, the US wants Turkey to revert to the Mahan-style Cold War paradigm of sea denial/control in the Black Sea and abandon the initiative in the Aegean and the Mediterranean to Greece. But Ankara has so far refused to abide by the request from Washington to increase NATO presence in the Black Sea – not because Erdoğan prefers the Turquoise Coast in the south but because he cannot afford another fallout with Putin in the middle of an economic crisis.

On a final note, the trajectory of Turkey-Russia relations deserves special attention due to the crisis in Ukraine and its geopolitical implications for the region. Turkey’s anxiety in this delicate relationship stems from security concerns and trade dependence on Russia. Despite major growth in Turkish-Russian cooperation in energy, tourism, and defense sectors in recent years, Ankara finds itself unsettled by much about Russia’s foreign policy in Syria, Ukraine, and Central Asia (Cafiero and Çubukçuoğlu 2022). The Black Sea is a transport and power projection artery through which 60% of Russian trade passes each year. However, Turkey runs a large and persistent trade deficit with its exports of only \$4.4 billion, which is only 25% of the bilateral trade volume, and remains as the weaker party in the cooperative rivalry it forged with Russia during the past five years (Sabah 2021). In this context, gas is a critical commodity for power generation, industrial production, and household consumption that has economic and strategic implications for Turkey’s security outlook. It constitutes about 30% of Turkey’s primary energy demand and is a highly sensitive topic in the run up to the presidential elections in 2023.

Although Turkey increased the share of gas imports from the US by 144%, Azerbaijan by 20.5%, and Qatar by 32% (Erkul Kaya 2021a), Russia’s share is still significant. Partly due to global warming and dry summers, low hydropower input forced an increased reliance on imported gas for power generation and Turkey’s gas consumption touched almost 60 bcm in 2021. About

half of that input came from Russia with 63% year-over-year increase in volume (Reuters and Daily Sabah 2022). Due to global shortages, it is much more expensive to substitute Russian gas with spot LNG than it was in 2019-2020, and Azeri gas cannot be a substitute for it in the short-term either. Russian *Rosatom's* exclusive support in financing and engineering the first build-and-operate nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, Mersin adds another layer to this complex relationship. “If Iran has it [nuclear power], this is a threat to Turkey,” says Akyener, “For the West, the plant would be a medium-risk, low-profit project; For Russia, it is a low-risk, medium-profit project, and the political leverage for Moscow elevates it to the high-profit level” (Akyener int 2021). “Just as the USSR setup an aluminum and iron-steel factory in Turkey in the 1970s, Russia offered to build a nuclear plant for us. If the project succeeds, it will have multiplier effects on the Turkish economy overall,” says another expert on energy geopolitics (Öğütçü int 2021).

Russia’s potential coercive use of energy, tourism, and goods trade as bargaining cards in regional conflicts adds a risk premium on Turkey’s economic outlook; and economy is the most important pillar of the AKP’s success. “The AKP will refrain from activities that might negatively impact the country’s economic outlook in the interim; its performance is the critical determinant for elections looming in 2023,” adds Ülgen (Ülgen int 2021). Turkey is seeking to rebalance its energy portfolio and distribute geopolitical risk among its trade partners in the West, Middle East, and Eurasia by shifting to local resources for power generation, increasing storage capacity, and diversifying the gas import-base. Therefore, anticipated repercussions of a potential NATO-Russia confrontation in the Black Sea makes Turkey think twice. Russia is increasingly acting as an assertive and resurgent power in Europe and elsewhere. Although Ankara provides military assistance to Kyiv as a means of mending fences with Washington/NATO, it is acutely aware of the risks involved in a conflict scenario where it might be dragged into an unintended hot incident

with Russia over the latter's retaliation to NATO's presence/support in Ukraine. Turkey would be on the receiving end of collateral damages in the event of a major fallout with Russia, and Ankara tries to avoid a situation where it is left out in the dark having to manage a crisis over navigation rights in the Turkish Straits. This bleak scenario might put Ankara under intense pressure to back Turkey's NATO allies in concerted action against Russia in the future and further restrain the Turkish economy already sailing through dire straits. It would also be the end of Turkey's intended position as a regional power and a delicate rebalancer in the new equilibrium between NATO and Russia.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis started with the question as to why maritime domains in the global commons encountered heightened importance for Turkey between 2016 and 2021. The research explored contributing factors that have shaped Ankara's "Blue Homeland" strategic policy through a neoclassical realist lens. The analysis employed process tracing to provide insights into both structural and domestic contexts and derived causal relevance for each contributing factor by examining the timeline of events from the contemporary origination of Turkey's maritime policies until the present day. The data derived from the literature review supplemented the outcomes of primary research in conjunction with expert interviews. Using data obtained, the theoretical model mapped structural factors and systemic stimuli onto moderating factors in strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations that provided further explanatory power to determine the mechanism through which Turkey interprets and responds to its external environment.

The research conducted for this thesis reveals that Turkey is a traditional land power trying to claim its place as an emerging maritime power and framing naval power as an influential element of its quest for strategic autonomy. Its increasing interest in the maritime domain is one component of a broader pattern among emerging powers to claim a larger share of the global commons for exploitation. The policy framework fits into the model of an authoritarian regime acting within an assertive strategic culture and powerful nationalist sentiment, trying to survive under a restricted strategic environment while facing clear and imminent threats to its sovereign interests. This reflects the case of a traditional land power employing naval activism to secure its place as an emergent maritime power, not dissimilar to cases of China, Russia, and Iran. The analytical framework may be applied to the wider universe of geographically zone-locked countries to

understand their assertive naval stance for maintaining forward-defense capabilities in the maritime domain. The combination of underlying causal factors in the case of Turkey produces a hardline foreign policy response against perceived threats, of which Blue Homeland is just a single instance. Turkey's armed operations in Syria, overseas basing rights in Qatar, military support for Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabagh, and presence in Libya are other manifestations of this policy of securitization.

The study reveals that there is a persistent, state-centric, *realpolitik* strategic culture with its roots in the early republican era that guides policy options in accordance with structural pressures, material distribution of capabilities, and preferences of domestic-political constituents. Turkey's cultural memory, since late Ottoman times, is geopolitically oriented and tends to prevent encirclement by Greece/Cyprus on the high seas. There is perennial anxiety about the state's sovereignty, territoriality integrity, and security while mistrust runs high between Turkey and its traditional foes of Greece and the RoC. International law facilitates useful guidelines for resolving maritime disputes peacefully and amicably, but shortcomings in the UNCLOS maritime regime and the absence of political resolution handicap the potential solutions on equitable terms, which lends extended latitude to power politics. Accordingly, legal disputes exacerbate Turkey's geopolitical competition with its neighbors in the maritime domain. Additionally, economic resources such as offshore energy deposits act as important systemic stimuli that inform maritime policy and naval strategy.

Based on the continuity of strategic culture, the Turkish navy developed the main pillars of a comprehensive strategy to transcend the traditional Greek-Turkish rivalry and achieve its blue water aspirations. Between 2004 and 2021, amidst an increasingly restricted strategic environment, higher clarity of threats, and signals to act, Turkey gradually reinforced an activist foreign policy

to defend its interests from the periphery, which is partially manifested in the Blue Homeland policy. Domestic processes functioned as modifiers of the type, intensity, and duration of foreign policy responses to systemic stimuli. The study finds that there are conspicuous nuances in the timing of causal factors that explain the variance of policy outcomes across temporal periods. Under a relatively permissive environment prevailing between 2004 and 2010, the AKP government followed liberal policies and codified an alternative strategic culture based on Islamic values, soft-power, and norm-building. The logrolled coalition among Islamists, Gülenists, and liberals supported the EU membership prospect and trade expansion while Turkey's aggregate capabilities increased in comparison to its neighbors. As the clarity of threats from the maritime domain gradually rose, the AKP enjoyed high domestic popularity but was over-committed to the EU agenda and under-balanced its challengers in the Eastern Mediterranean, which led to the emergence of the “Blue Homeland” concept in the naval community. Based on a re-imagination of Kemalist strategic culture, the essentials of this concept followed earlier iterations of strategic thinking in the navy, along with experiences and traditions of naval operations practiced since the 1960s. At that time, Turkey's maritime interests mainly concerned the traditional Greek-Turkish rivalry, the Cyprus Question, and energy rights in the Mediterranean region.

From 2010 onwards, the political fallout with Israel, Arab Uprisings, and civil wars in the Middle East briefly provided an opportunity for Turkey to make identity projection along with its vision of political Islam, but instead, by 2016, it ended up in “self-encirclement” against a growing rival alliance of regional powers. Rising nationalism and the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, set the stage for a power reshuffle and emergence of a new logrolled coalition in domestic politics, followed by re-prioritization of foreign policy options. Turkey positioned itself into a pivotal role between the NATO/US and Eurasia and balanced its traditional alliances with regional security

impediments. This combination of structural and domestic-political factors ushered in a policy re-orientation and positioned the issue of the survival of the state (*beka*) once again as a top priority of an activist foreign policy. Blue Homeland in the post-2016 period is an outcome of this new paradigm. Maritime zones and Cyprus are part of Turkey's core interests that cut across time periods and political party lines, so even if there was someone else other than Erdoğan in power, Turkey would have actively defended its maritime interests.

Under new policy priorities of the state's survivability, territorial integrity, and security since 2016, access to energy rights and efforts to solve the Cyprus Question became epiphenomenal to geopolitical posturing and the quest for maritime control. Based on a redefinition of the *Vatan* concept, *Mavi Vatan* is a case of naval activism, an extension of Turkey's self-conception as a nation-state in the maritime domain. The proverbial maritime commons are therefore less global and more politicized in the context of Turkey's regional predicaments. The emergence of a hybrid Islamic-nationalist strategic culture and a less constrained government steered an era of foreign policy activism that culminated in a series of interventions abroad from Syria to Azerbaijan and celebrated naval power as an enabler of this militaristic posture. Blue Homeland provided the momentum to Libya and Cyprus for strategic outreach and served as a unifying symbol for coordination in the indigenous military-industry-media complex. Between 2016 and 2019, the AKP re-securitized Turkey's geopolitics and adopted a proactive maritime policy to defend its interests from afar rather than merely reacting against challengers. Turkey employed hard-power instruments to disrupt the rival EMGF alliance consisting of Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf countries and formally declared full coordinates of its maritime zones of interest to the UN General Secretariat. This pre-emptive intervention policy reached its zenith in 2019 when Ankara signed a maritime demarcation MoU with Libya's GNA.

The table in Figure 46 below shows that Turkey's maritime trajectory is part of a larger shift in its foreign policy between 2004 and 2001. The intensity of maritime activism varies in accordance with structural pressures/incentives and intervening domestic factors that moderate foreign policy preferences in politics. As the strategic environment became more restricted and Turkey's threat perception increased, the emergence of Kemalist strategic culture, more authoritarian-centralized domestic political structure, and national solidarity around the *Vatan* concept produced a hardline foreign policy.

Figure 46: Phases of Turkish Foreign Policy and Maritime Posture, 2004-2021

	2004 – 2010	2010 – 2016	2016 – 2020	2020 – 2021
Systemic Level Strategic Environment	Permissive	Gradually Restricted	Restricted	Restricted
Systemic Level Clarity, Immediacy of Threats	Low	Medium	High	High
Domestic Level Dominant Strategic Culture	Multiaxial Diplomacy Norm Building Soft-Power	Identity Projection Geo-culturalism Imperial Outreach	<i>Realpolitik</i> Kemalist, Assertive Securitization	Hybrid Culture Turkish-Islamic Deterrence, Diplomacy
Domestic Level Institutions, Coalitions	More Constrained Stronger Institutions Logrolled Coalition (1): Islamists, Gülenists, Liberals	More Constrained Weaker Institutions Breakup of the Coalition (1)	Less Constrained Transition to Executive Presidency Logrolled Coalition (2): Islamists, Nationalists, Eurasianists	Less Constrained Executive Presidency Reshuffle of the Coalition (2)
Maritime Posture				
Hawkish				
Dovish				
	Passivity	Under-balancing	Over-balancing	Détente

The purchase of Russian S-400s and the ensuing political rift with the US/NATO alliance placed Turkey in a precarious situation, ostensibly wavering between two rival camps and trying to find a way out of the security dilemma with Greece/RoC. The government instrumentalized and politicized the *Mavi Vatan* symbol to an extent where diminishing marginal returns could no longer sustain an overtly activist maritime posture. Under these circumstances, geopolitical factors and domestic-political concerns required a policy realignment, thus downgrading Blue Homeland's

militaristic posture and replacing it with a more pragmatic discourse. Turkey partially backtracked from Blue Homeland and reached a détente in its relations within the region and the Western alliance. From 2021 onwards, it has started prioritizing diplomacy over militarism to reduce geopolitical risks, alleviate economic woes, and improve its international image by employing Blue Homeland increasingly as rhetoric in domestic politics than as coercion in foreign matters. The question regarding how Ankara develops its maritime strategy thereafter will be of crucial importance for the regional equilibrium, solidarity of the NATO alliance, and Turkey's relations with the US. One thing is sure, the "genie is out of the bottle," and Turkey is set on an arduous journey to claim its place in the league of maritime nations. Its sea power will continue to be a challenge for those who try to push it back in.

Appendices

1. Interview Participants and Sample Questions

1.1. Formal Interview Participants

Figure 47: Interview Participants

Name	Position	Location
A Mid-Career Turkish Naval Officer (TN-1)	Turkish Navy	Europe
A Senior Turkish Diplomatic Source (SDS-1)	Turkish Government	Europe
A Turkish Business Expert (TBE)	An NGO in the US	Washington DC, US
Oğuzhan Akyener	Director, Turkish Energy Strategies and Politics Research Centre	Ankara, Turkey
Ertuğrul Apakan	Ambassador (Ret.), Former Representative of Turkey to the UN and OSCE, Former President of the UNSC, Former Director General of Greece-Cyprus Desk at the Turkish MFA	Ankara, Turkey
Dr. Soner Çağaptay	Beyer Family Fellow, Director of Turkish Research Program, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy	Washington DC, US
Dr. Senem Aydın-Düzgit	Prof. of International Relations at Sabancı University	Istanbul, Turkey
Dr. Nicholas Danforth	Senior Visiting Fellow for the German Marshall Fund, ELIAMEP (Greece)	Washington DC, US
Dr. Konstantinos Filis	Director of Research at the Institute of International Relations, Panteion University	Athens, Greece
Dr. Ioannis Grigoriadis	Head of Turkey Project, ELIAMEP (Greece) Prof. of European Studies at Bilkent University in Turkey, Member of the Greek-Turkish Forum	Athens, Greece
Dr. Kerem Gülay	Prof. of Law at Koç University	Istanbul, Turkey
Cem Gürdeniz	Rear Admiral (Ret.), Turkish Navy Progenitor of the Blue Homeland concept	Istanbul, Turkey

Dr. Alexis Heraclides	Prof. Emeritus of International Relations, Panteion University	Athens, Greece
Dr. Kostas Ifantis	Prof. of International Relations at the Department of International and European Studies, Panteion University	Athens, Greece
Dr. Pınar İpek	Expert on Energy Security and Political Economy, TOBB University	Ankara, Turkey
Dr. Burak Kadercan	Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy, US Naval War College	Rhode Island, US
Dr. Hakan Karan	Chief of Department, Maritime Law, Head of Center for Applied Research for the Sea and Maritime Law at Ankara University, Advisor to the MFA	Ankara, Turkey
Dr. Manos Karagiannis	Reader in International Security at the Defense Studies Department, King's College London	London, UK
Dr. Antonis Klapsis	Academic Coordinator of the Centre of International and European Political Economy and Governance, The University of Peloponnese	Corinth, Greece
Dr. Deniz Kutluk	Rear Admiral (Ret.), Turkish Navy Adjunct Lecturer	Istanbul, Turkey
Arda Mevlütoğlu	Defense Analyst Middle East Technical University	Ankara, Turkey
Richard Outzen	Colonel (Ret). US Army Former US FAO in Turkey Geopolitical Consultant	Washington DC, US
Mehmet Ögütçü	Former Diplomat at the Turkish MFA President of Bosphorus/London Energy Clubs	Izmir, Turkey
Kadir Sağdıç	Vice Admiral (Ret.), Turkish Navy Former Board Member of Koç University's Maritime Forum	Turkey September 2021
Dr. Aaron Stein	Foreign Policy Research Institute Director of the Middle East Program	Washington DC, US
Dr. Deniz Tansi	Turkish Cypriot Academic Expert on Turkish-Israeli Relations Head of Public Policy Department at Yeditepe University	Istanbul, Turkey
Dr. Zenonas Tziarras	Greek Cypriot Academic Researcher on Turkey at PRIO Cyprus Center	Nicosia, Cyprus

Dr. Hasan Ünal	Prof. of International Relations at Maltepe University, formerly at Bilkent University Advisory Board Member to Turkish Cypriot Leadership	Istanbul, Turkey
Sinan Ülgen	Former President of EDAM, Former Diplomat at the Turkish MFA, Visiting Scholar at Carnegie Europe	Istanbul, Turkey
Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı	Director, Ankara Office German Marshall Fund of the United States	Ankara, Turkey
Dr. Aylin Ünver Noi	Former Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations (CTR) at Johns Hopkins SAIS, Prof. of International Relations at İstinye University in Turkey	Istanbul, Turkey

1.2. Informal Interview Participants

Figure 48: Informal Interview Participants, Online Panel/Conference Respondents

Name	Position	Meeting Place, Date
A Senior Official at the Communications Department	Turkish Navy	Ankara, October 2021
Dr. Mithat Çelikpala	Prof. of Eurasian Security and Geopolitics at Kadir Has University, Turkey	ISPI Rome: East Med Conference, May 2021
Dr. Ryan Gingeras	Prof. at the Dept. of National Security Affairs at the US Naval Postgraduate School	California, US December 2021
Dr. Serhat Güvenç	Prof. of International Relations at Kadir Has University, Turkey	Turkey, January 2022
Atilla Kıyat	Vice Admiral (Ret.), Turkish Navy	Turkey, October 2021
Cem Devrim Yaylalı	Naval Observer, Marine Enthusiast	Turkey, January 2022
A Senior Turkish Naval Officer (TN-2)	Turkish Navy	Turkey, May 2021
A Senior Turkish Naval Officer (TN-3)	Turkish Navy	Turkey, September 2021
A Senior Israeli Expert on Turkey (IE-1)	Research Institute in Israel	Maritime Policy Conference, August 2021

A Senior Israeli Expert on Turkey (IE-2)	Research Institute in the US	Maritime Policy Conference, August 2021
A Senior Geopolitical Expert in the US	Political Risk Advisory & Consultancy	Washington DC, US November 2021
A Mid-Career Former Turkish Diplomat (FTD)	Turkish MFA	Switzerland, September 2021
A Senior Turkish Diplomatic Source (SDS-2)	Turkish Government	Turkey December 2021

1.3. Sample Set of Interview Questions

Below is a sample set of interview questions directed at participants for this research:

Q1) Turkey’s Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) strategic policy existed since 2006 but it gained heightened importance only after 2016. What factors in geopolitics and domestic politics in Turkey contributed to the rise of this more assertive posture since then? Connected to this question, do you believe that ‘Blue Homeland’ is a maximalist, revisionist policy in alignment with the AKP’s neo-Ottomanist / Islamist policies or is it more to do with Turkey’s shifting geopolitical calculus in relation to changing relative distribution of power in the region? In other words, what changed since 2016?

Q2) You have synopsised Davutoglu’s book the “Strategic Depth”. On one hand, there is a shifting strategic environment around Turkey, from the Black Sea to Libya, and the Caucasus. Turkey is the most powerful country in the East Med according to several country indexes, supported by a strong indigenous military-industry complex. For many observers, its relative power is on the rise vis-à-vis its neighbors. How is Turkey positioning itself in a multipolar (or even non-polar) world? From the US viewpoint, is it a regional actor, a potential hegemonic power, or a pivot between the East and the West?

Q3) If we look at the US media, there is a whole barrage of criticism for Turkey, mostly focused on the AKP/Erdogan angle but also some that cut across the political spectrum. For instance, one of the commentators says, “there would still be a lot of problems between the US and Turkey, even if there was someone else other than Erdogan in power”. Another one says, “the shift that has taken place in recent years is not due to any structural change in US-Turkey bilateral relations, but more to developments within Turkey”. What is your view on the recent trajectory of US-Turkey relations? If there was someone else other than Erdogan in power, could the US-Turkey relationship be different? Or is there a deeper undercurrent in Turkish foreign policy that goes across party lines?

Q4) Turkey and Israel have had an uneasy relationship since mid-2000s. The political fallout in Davos (2009), the Mavi Marmara incident (2010), Turkey’s relations with Hamas, and Israel’s strategic tripartite partnership with Greece-Cyprus-Egypt are just a few highlights to quote. What is the role of deterioration in Turkish-Israeli political relations on the AKP’s breakup with the FETÖ (Gülenists), the controversial trials (Sledgehammer, Ergenekon), and Turkey’s more assertive foreign policy since 2016?

2. Stages of Turkish Foreign Policy: 2004-2021

The figure below summarizes observable changes in Turkish Foreign Policy and maritime strategy.

Figure 49: Summary of Turkish Foreign Policy’s Trajectory, 2004-2021

	2004 – 2010	2010 – 2016	2016 – 2020	2020 – 2021
Turkish Foreign Policy Focus	Turkey-EU Relations	Turkey-Middle East Relations	Turkey-Eurasian Relations	Multi-Vector Policy
Blue Homeland (Stage)	Emergence	Development	Apex	Rebalancing
Strength of the AKP’s Nationalist Discourse	Low	Medium	High	High
Turkey’s Nominal Claim on Energy Rights and Maritime Zones (Position)	Turkey has interests in off-shore energy prospects.	Turkey has rights in high seas and off-shore energy prospects.	Turkey has vital interests and lawful rights to demarcate and secure its maritime periphery and resources therein.	Turkey is ready to negotiate with the EU and the Middle East countries to equitably delimit maritime zones and develop energy fields.
Turkey’s Real Claim in Geopolitical Terms (Interest)	The government wants to use energy prospects as a catalyst for rapprochement in Cyprus and facilitate Turkey’s accession negotiations for membership to the EU.	The government wants to leverage energy cooperation to expand its influence in the Middle East and become a regional economic powerhouse.	Turkish defense establishment wants to maximize security and the government wants to alleviate uncertainty through closer ties with Russia amid rising geopolitics and growing isolation.	The government wants control over the Blue Homeland narrative to facilitate rapprochement with the West while balancing with Russia for geopolitical leverage.

3. Political Factions in Turkey

The table below summarizes main political factions mentioned earlier in the context of defining the Blue Homeland concept in present-day Turkey. These are broad definitions that are subject to interpretation by their respective bearers and should be viewed through a critical lens.

Figure 50: Political Factions of Kemalism

Faction	Definition	Interpretation of “Blue Homeland”
Kemalism	Origins in the late Ottoman era. Prime goal is the state’s survival under anarchy. Puts securitization at the center of state’s continuity. Advocates a strong, central	Blue Homeland is the <i>Misâk-ı Milli</i> at sea and its borders should be defended like the land territory. The Seville Map (2006) is the

	government. Culturally western-oriented and geopolitically neutral but Turkish nationalist and anti-imperialist. Envisions an independent, secular, unitary nation-state.	maritime equivalent of the Sèvres Treaty (1920) and should be rejected in its entirety. Blue Homeland is a symbol of Turkish maritime consciousness and is about Turkey's modernization. It extends into culture, education, trade, and sports.
Atatürkçülük	Liberal version of Kemalism. Culturally and geopolitically western-oriented. Puts democratic society and balanced civil-military relations at the center of state's continuity. Envisions an independent, secular, unitary nation-state but embraces globalization and advocates closer relations with the US, NATO, and the EU.	Blue Homeland is a maximalist position and a good negotiation tactic, but it is not an absolute goal. Turkey would do more harm than good to itself by locking onto a fixated view of this concept. Blue Homeland should stay as a symbol of rising maritime consciousness in Turkey and not be affixed to a particular geographic map.
Ulusalçılık	Authoritarian version of Kemalism. Culturally western-oriented but geopolitically anti-Western and anti-globalization. Defends sanctity of Turkish national identity and territorial integrity. Envisions an independent, secular, unitary nation-state within rigid boundaries of the 1920s and 30s.	Blue Homeland must be defended at all costs, including armed measures. It is a show of Turkey's nationhood, dignity, and independence from the West. Turkey must become a maritime nation per Atatürk's vision in 1924 and apply this in all aspects of life.
Eurasianism	Culturally eastern-oriented, transnational version of Ulusalçılık. The Turkish branch belongs to Alexander Dugin's neo-Eurasianist doctrine manifested after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Envisions an independent, secular, unitary nation-state. Advocates closer relations with Central Asia, Iran, Russia, and China.	Blue Homeland is sacrosanct and must be defended and supported at all costs with assistance from Central Asian Turkic States, Iran, Russia, and China. Turkey should quit NATO and join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

4. A Simple Ratio Analysis of the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean

The purpose of this section is to compare maritime claims of Greece, Turkey, and the RoC, and demonstrate the effect of equitability principle on delimitation. In the absence of a condominium-type solution between all parties, it serves as a useful guide in international law for the reader and attempts to provide an objective view of facts on the ground.

Past cases of dispute settlement show that geography is the key determinant of maritime rights. The ICJ in its decisions disregards certain factors, such as arguments based on historic rights, disparities in economic welfare, and oil concessions. Maritime delimitation between two states must also avoid infringing upon rights of a third state, an example of which may be a consideration of the effect on Turkey of a possible EEZ delimitation between Greece and Cyprus or Greece and Egypt. The section has two cases, one for the Aegean Sea and another for the Eastern Mediterranean. In each case, geographic data serves as the basis of ratio analysis. Overall, the analysis concludes that given the principles of non-encroachment and proportionality, it would be a gross act of negligence to overlook equitable rights and to let the equidistance line between the Aegean/Eastern Mediterranean islands and the Turkish coast be the rule that governs delimitation of CS/EEZ and territorial waters. The overarching reaction in Turkey toward such views is that Greece and the RoC abuse the geography and present a distorted view of the reality in accordance with their own interests. Greek response is that Turkey ignores international law (UNCLOS) Articles 3 and 121 that grant 12-mile territorial waters and equal weight to islands in CS/EEZ delimitation.

Case 1: Aegean Sea

Figure 51: Aegean Sea Geographic Data

	Turkey	Greece	Aegean Sea
Number of islands (excl. rocks)	96	460	556
Number of inhabited islands	7	170 ¹¹⁰	177
Total population on islands inc. partials (approx.)	15,000	1,318,228	1,333,228
Area of islands/islets inc. partials e.g., Crete (km ²)	427	20,479	20,906
Perimeter of islands inc. partials e.g., Crete (km)	470	7,740	8,210
Islands with less than 20 inhabitants	0	20	20
Distance of East Aegean/Dodecanese Islands (miles)	1-20	150+	--
Percentage of islands to sea area	0.022%	10.5%	--
Length of coastal line without islands/islets (km)	2,327	2,732	5,059

¹¹⁰ The number of inhabited islands/islets varies across sources, cited as between 166 and 227.

Length of coastal line with islands/islets (km)	2,797	10,472	13,269
Population in the Aegean Region (approx.)	10,5 M	10.3M	20.8M
Area of the Aegean Mainland Region (km ²)	90,251	110,496	--
CS/EEZ Claimed (km ²)	89,000	179,404	193,950
CS/EEZ Claimed (%)	45.9%	92.5%	--
Territorial Waters Owned - 6 miles (km ²)	14,546	84,368	193,950 ¹¹¹
Territorial Waters Owned - 6 miles (%)	7.5%	43.5%	--
Territorial Waters Claimed - 12 miles (%)	8.7%	71.5%	--

Source: (Goksel et al. 1999), (Syrigos and Dokos n.d.)

Figure 52: Ratio Analysis for Delimitation of Aegean Continental Shelves/EEZs

Length of Coastlines	Ratio	Turkey	Greece	Note
Aegean Total	1:3.74	21.1%	78.9%	Best Case for GR
GR Islands vs. TR Aegean Coast	1:2.77	26.5%	73.5%	Closer to GR claim
Mainlands Only	1:1.17	46%	54%	Closer to TR claim
Population				
GR Total vs. TR Aegean Coast	1:0.98	50.4%	49.6%	Closer to TR claim
GR Islands vs. TR Aegean Coast	1:0.13	88.8%	12.2%	Better than TR claim
Distance				
GR Islands vs. TR Aegean Coast	1:0.07	94%+	6%-	Best Case for TR
Surface Area				
GR Islands vs. TR Aegean Coast	1:0.23	81.5%	18.5%	Better than TR claim
GR Total vs. TR Aegean Coast	1:1.46	40.6%	59.4%	Closer to TR claim
Mainlands Only	1:1.23	44.9%	56.1%	Closer to TR claim

Data shows that, even in the best-case scenario of relative coastal lengths and leaving all other factors aside, Greece's claim to sovereign rights on the Aegean continental shelf should not be greater than 78.9%.¹¹² This number will still drop significantly if we put a constraint to exclude uninhabited islands. Also, while the analysis takes only Turkey's Aegean region into consideration, Greece comes with its entirety into certain ratios. Out of nine criteria in the analysis above, four of them are closer to Turkey's claim (45.9%), two of them are even higher than that (> 80%), and only two of them are closer to but still lower than Greece's claim (92.5%). Greece claims all the available CS/EEZ plus the right to assign 12-mile territorial waters to all islands, islets, and rocks irrespective of their size, location, and distance from the mainland.

¹¹¹ High seas make up 49% of the total water surface under the 6-mile territorial water regime.

¹¹² "The prevailing ICJ practice is that, in 80% of the cases they consider relative coastal length of respective mainlands as the main factor, and the tribunal's verdict is part of customary law" (Gülay int 2021). "The tribunal's verdict would be closer to Turkey's version" (Gülay int 2021; Stein 2021b).

Under a hypothetical 12-mile regime, Greece owns 71.5% of the Aegean whereas Turkey gets only 8,7% without any CS/EEZ beyond its territorial waters. In other words, on top of owning 43.5% of the sea as territorial waters, Greece claims an additional 49% of the sea as its own CS/EEZ. Syrigos et al., for instance, include rocks and “grey zones” in the 11,790 km Greek coastal length and claims presence of strait baselines arguing that “Eastern Aegean Islands form a chain along the entire length of Asia Minor coastline... delimitation should be based on equidistance/median-line... and greatest part of the CS/EEZ in the Aegean belongs to Greece...” (Syrigos and Dokos n.d., 52). But Greece is not an archipelagic state; Aegean islands/islets (not rocks) make up only 15.5%¹¹³ of the country and only 10.5% of the sea surface. So, even per UNCLOS, it may not be entitled to “draw straight baselines joining the outermost points of the outermost islands” (“UNCLOS: Part IV - Archipelagic States” 1982) and claim presence of island chains with their own CS/EEZ to the detriment of the Turkish mainland on the opposite side. There is no precedent for it in international law where islands with 10.5% of the sea area hold 90% of sovereignty against an adjacent mainland many times their size.

As shown in the Figure 53 below, a possible solution to Aegean maritime disputes is to have multiple territorial water and CS/EEZ regimes along the 25° East Longitude median line. In Areas 1 and 2, Greece and Turkey would apply 10-mile and 3-mile territorial water regimes, respectively.¹¹⁴ Greece would have exclusive jurisdiction over EEZ on the west of the median-line (1) and Turkey would have jurisdiction for the part on the east (2). This is based on the average of ratios in Figure 52 except for “population” which is usually not a relevant criterion in delimitation. Turkey’s average ratio is ~50.7% and Greece’s is ~49.6%, which is roughly half and half. Sovereignty over “gray zones” would also be divided 50/50 between the two countries.

¹¹³ 17.6%, including rocks and “grey zones”.

¹¹⁴ 3-miles in Area 2 as per the Lausanne Treaty’s accepted *de facto* provisions.

Figure 53: A Possible Solution to Maritime Delimitation in the Aegean Sea and the East Med



Case 2: The East Med

Figure 54: Eastern Mediterranean Geographic Data

	Turkey	Greece	RoC	East Med
Number of islands (excl. rocks)	7	5	1	13
Number of inhabited islands	2	5	1	8
Total population on islands inc. partials (approx.)	<100	723,085	701,000	1,424,185
Area of islands/islets inc. partials e.g., Crete (km ²)	<100	10,101	9,251	19,452
Coastal Length of RoC and GR islands facing TR	--	187	648	--
Coastal Length of TR facing GR islands and RoC	1,577	--	--	--
Distance of GR/RoC Islands to GR and TR (miles)	1-110	200-300	100+	--
Population in the East Med Region (approx.)	10,5 M	723,085	701,000	11.92M
Area of the East Med Region (km ²)	89,493	10,101	9,251	--
CS/EEZ Claimed (km ²)	189,000	60,000+	70,000+	225,295
CS/EEZ Claimed (%)	83.9%	26.7%+	31.1%+	--

Source: (Yayci 2020a), (Syrigos and Dokos n.d.)

Figure 55: Ratio Analysis for Delimitation of East Med Continental Shelves/EEZ

Length of Coastlines	Ratio	Turkey	Greece	RoC
East Med Total	1:0.12:0.41	65.4%	7.7%	26.9%
Population				
East Med Total	1:0.07:0.07	88.1%	6.1%	5.8%
Distance				
East Med Total (Mean)	1:0.14:0.42	64.0%	9.2%	26.8%
Surface Area				
East Med Total	1:0.11:0.10	82.2%	9.3%	8.5%

In the Eastern Mediterranean, the situation is simpler and brings more emphasis on equitability. Even in the best-case scenario of relative distances and leaving all other factors aside, Greece may not claim EEZ on > 9.3% of the Eastern Mediterranean and the RoC may not do so on > 26.9% of it. These numbers will drop significantly if we treat each island separately on its own merit: For instance, Kastellorizo at < 1 mile from the Turkish coast would receive zero EEZ; Rhodes at < 10 miles from Turkey may receive only a fraction of the 9.3%. etc. Yet, Greece and the RoC claim in total almost 58% of the EEZ with the right to assign up to 200-mile breadth to all islands irrespective of their size, location, distance from the mainland. Again, there is no legal precedent where relatively small islands 200-300 miles away from their home base hold up 90% of sovereignty against an adjacent mainland many times their size.

Here also Greece adopted straight baselines as if islands constitute an archipelago in EEZ delimitation with Egypt. The RoC is an archipelagic state, and it may claim EEZ in accordance with ratios above, but Greece is not; plus, most of the large Greek islands are on the opposite side of the 25° East Longitude median line, and they have a cut-off effect on the Turkish-Egyptian-Libyan mainlands.¹¹⁵ Turkey's claim (83.9%) is also larger than most ratios but not to a colossal extent; it can be settled around 75% through negotiations with Greece by designating the 9% portion as a joint-development area. As a possible solution per Figure 53 above, Greece and Turkey would apply 12-mile territorial water regimes in areas 3 and 4, respectively. Based on average ratios above, Turkey would have 70.5% of the EEZ in area 4, Greek islands would have 8.7%, and Cyprus would have 20.7%. Greece would have exclusive rights to EEZ in area 3. The case of Cyprus would be confirmed separately as part of a joint-development area between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and an MoU between with Turkey if/when a political solution comes within reach.

¹¹⁵ The data for Cyprus includes TRNC. The RoC's share would shrink if we considered the TRNC as an independent state.

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