

# HOW FAR IS TURKEY FROM A MEARSHEIMERIAN TRAGEDY?

*John Mearsheimer's offensive realism has come to describe and analyze regional powers' dilemmas before the challenge of regional leadership. Considering the vicious circle of states' behavior throughout history, the American scholar identified this process as a tragedy leading continuously to balances and counter-balances. In this regard, international anarchy and the uncertainty about their competitors' intentions urge states to care about their own survival, maximizing their power but at the same time provoking fear. Under this theoretical lens, this article tests the possibility of a "Mearsheimerian tragedy" for the case of Turkey and examines whether Ankara has to overcome systemic pressures as well as past strategic mistakes of its own.*

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**I**t is broadly accepted that Turkey occupies a geopolitically significant position. Its simultaneous access to different peripheries, as well as its subsequent multidimensional role, have led the country to be named “a pivotal state”<sup>1</sup> and “the bridge between the East and the West.”<sup>2</sup> Under this prospect, Turkey is important for European security in general, and for any great power desiring to implement effective strategic surveillance of the greater region. In the post-Cold War era, an indication of this importance is provided by the NATO document MC-161, according to which there are 16 crucial, unstable, and dangerous regions in the world; 13 of them can be found in the greater periphery of Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Such a geopolitical role demands that the country practices a continuous and cohesive strategic behavior not influenced by possible internal imbalances.

It is due to these reasons that the neorealist approach of International Relations (IR) theory best accounts for the case of Turkey. Neorealism encapsulates the hypotheses of state-centrism in the international system, international anarchy, sovereignty, survival, and is split basically among defensive and offensive realisms. In Glenn Snyder’s words, the major difference between these two sub-approaches is related to the perception about how powerful the state must be in order to survive; offensive realism refers to the unlimited power maximization states pursue because uncertainty cannot be mitigated, while defensive realism focuses on the need to balance against the fear of counter-balancing coalitions.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Kenneth Waltz’s defensive realism prefixes state survival via respect to the balance of power.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, John Mearsheimer’s offensive realism is identified with maximization of interests met by power maximization as a prerequisite for the survival of state sovereignty. As a consequence, the foremost aim of grand strategy is regional hegemony, as well as relative economic growth to support military empowerment, preponderance in the area of ground forces, and persistent efforts for nuclear superiority.<sup>6</sup>

1 For instance: Alan O. Makovsky, “Turkey,” in Robert Chase, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy (eds.) *The Pivotal States: A New Framework for U.S. Policy in the Developing World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), pp. 88-119. Graham E. Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008).

2 For instance: Vojtech Mastny and R. Craig Nation (eds.), *Turkey Between East and West: New Challenges for a Rising Regional Power* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1998); Alan M. Greaves, “Trans-Anatolia: Examining Turkey as a Bridge Between East and West,” *Anatolian Studies*, Vol. 57 (2007), pp. 1-15.

3 As cited in: Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney, “The New Security Environment and Turkey’s ISAF Experience,” in: Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney (ed.) *Contentious Issues of Security and the Future of Turkey* (London: Ashgate, 2007), p. 179.

4 Glenn Snyder, “Mearsheimer’s World – Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2002), p. 153.

5 According to Kenneth Waltz: “Success is the ultimate test of policy, and success is defined as preserving and strengthening the state (...) as they are in a self-help situation, survival outranks profit as a goal, since survival is a prerequisite to the achievement of other ends (...) maintaining the status quo is the minimum goal of any great power.” Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 117, 134, 191.

6 John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), pp. 147-52.

This article is about the “Mearsheimerian tragedy” presented in Mearsheimer’s acclaimed book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, vis-à-vis the case of Turkey. The article explains what this tragic element is and how Turkey can be associated with it.

### *The Concept of Tragedy*

Mearsheimer borrows from the Greek word “tragedy” in order to give a title to his theory, described above. He refers to the vicious cycle of security dilemmas and anti-hegemonic coalitions dominating international politics. In Mearsheimer’s own words, the tragic element in great power politics lies in the fact that states, “whether they have revisionist goals or not,” are forced by the structure of the international system “to behave as if they were revisionist

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powers and compete with each other for power.”<sup>7</sup> The issues at stake in the latter encapsulate continuous security dilemmas resulting from uneven growth among the international system’s units and some of these units’ hegemonic aspirations.<sup>8</sup>

“Mearsheimerian tragedy” is a concept used to describe the endless will for power and domination as a way of survival. In terms of classical theater, tragedy is “an imitation of action of serious stature and complete”; i.e. a series of decisions made again and again as a result of misperception or ignorance.<sup>9</sup>

It has been mentioned already that the conflictual characteristics of the international system are endemic, but management of the situation is always the responsibility of leaders and strategic planners. Human actions are *ex vi termini* subjective, and thus, unpredictable. It is a matter of a correct analysis of the regional and global environment to maximize power up to the level of what the strong can do without provoking competitors’ anxiety and their subsequent will for external balancing, i.e., alliances. In this way, a great power escapes from the vicious cycle as far as its power maximization is not seen as a security dilemma by the others.

7 John Mearsheimer, “Conversations in International Relations: Interview with John J. Mearsheimer (Part I),” *International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2006), p. 120. For an alternative account of the tragic element, see: Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

8 Panayiotis Ifestos, *Weltanschauung and Claims for Political Sovereignty: European Defense, Security and Political Unification* (Athens: Poitita, 2001), p. 14.

9 Aristotle, *Poetics* (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2006), 1449 b, 25. For a thorough analysis, see: Martha Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy: An Approach to Aristotle’s Poetics* (New York: State University of New York Press).

## *Turkey's Tragedy*

The post-Cold War era has found Turkey more powerful in relative terms despite early pessimistic estimates.<sup>10</sup> Despite early concerns in Ankara regarding the country's changing geopolitical significance in the aftermath of the USSR's demise, Turkey remained as one of those allies/pivotal states that the US could cooperate with in order to secure its primacy worldwide without engaging directly in unstable regions. As one of the states bidding for regional hegemony, it is essential to analyze how balance of power determines and enforces Turkey's strategic behavior in the region vis-à-vis Russia, Syria, and Greece and consequently, how balance of capabilities is identified with when another actor is considered a threat.<sup>11</sup>

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Following Stephen Walt's typology on threat perception, it is deduced that Russia has ceased to represent a direct threat to the Turkish Republic's survival.<sup>12</sup> First, the Soviet GDP in 1990 was 2.042 trillion dollars after a long recession while, in 2014, the Russian GDP was 1.86 trillion after many years of growth.<sup>13</sup> Second, there are no Russian-Turkish land borders due to the ter-

ritorial fragmentation in the Caucasus with the establishment of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. This buffer zone is identified with a power vacuum in the region that is important for the decrease of the level of threat against Ankara. Third, Soviet military capabilities in 1991 were estimated to number 3,400,000 military personnel and a 133 billion-dollar defense budget, while, in 2014, these numbers were 771,000 and 70 respectively.<sup>14</sup> Fourth, Russia's intentions can be argued to have become benign, based on the renunciation of territorial claims on Kars and Ardahan as well as the cessation of demands to alter the regime of the Straits. The combination of the above-mentioned parameters contributed to the end of Russia's Cold War

10 As cited, for instance, in: William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy: 1774-2000* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p. 223.

11 The reason these specific neighbors are chosen is related with Russia's undoubted position in the margins of the regional balance of power on the one hand and Şükrü Elekdağ's analysis in the 1990s considering Syria and Greece. Elekdağ also refers to the Kurds as a central threat against the Turkish Republic. However, such a reference to the Kurds is avoided here as long as the current paper remains stably in state-centric analysis. Şükrü Elekdağ, “Two and one-half war strategy,” *Perceptions*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1996), pp. 33-57.

12 Referring to “threat perception” in the light of IR systemic theories, it is meant how balance of power determines the security dilemmas a state has to confront. In these terms, Walt introduces a typology on when a chasm in capabilities and policies is defined as a threat by a state. Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 21-6.

13 “The Soviet Union,” *The Military Balance*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (1991), p. 36; “Russia and Eurasia,” *The Military Balance*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (2015), p. 184.

14 *The Military Balance* (1991), p. 36. *The Military Balance* (2015), pp. 184-5.

revisionist aggression against Turkey. On the contrary, during the last two decades, there has been a sharp rise in the economic interdependence between the two states especially in the energy sector.

Considering other potential threats, Syria has found itself at the edge of paramount devastation. The ongoing civil war and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) territorial expansion have essentially paralyzed Damascus's internal cohesion and state power. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolts, Syria is at the mercy of external powers even for humanitarian aid. Turning to Greece, due to the current economic crisis, this traditional adversary of Turkey has experienced a sharp fall in its capabilities. As an indication, in 2014 its GDP was 246 billion dollars, down from 316 billion in 2008, and followed by a sharp decrease of its defense budget.<sup>15</sup>

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In broad terms, the most significant security dilemma posed by Russia – as well as by Syria and Greece – ceased to exist in the post-Cold War era, and Turkey has had the chance to expand its influence and power in its greater region. Turkey, with a booming population of nearly 77 million and a flourishing economy of 813 billion dollars of GDP in 2014, has proved to be a peer hegemon. Turkey has also confirmed the role of “a pivotal state,” broadening its cooperation with Balkan countries such as Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, while also cultivating its relations with post-Soviet countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>16</sup> Ankara has identified its grand strategy with increasing political and economic influence on “Turkic states,” such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. With regard to this set of priorities, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to state, in 2006:

The residents of this particular region do not have the luxury of just sitting back and being spectators of the world stage (...) Either we will be the subject of world politics, or the object (...) A Turkish Commonwealth would enable us to play a more active and efficient role in international forums, protect the interests of our people and contribute to peace and stability in our region.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> “Europe,” *The Military Balance*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (2015), p. 100; “Europe,” *The Military Balance*, Vol. 109, No. 1 (2009), p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> *The Military Balance* (2015), p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Mevlut Katik, “Turkic Summit to explore commonwealth possibility,” *Eurasianet*, 14 November 2006, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav111506.shtml>

Therefore, in Mearsheimerian terms, Turkey seems capable of maximizing its power and interests, and its position in the regional distribution of power seems to be stronger than ever since its establishment in 1923.

### *At Odds with the Good News*

The data above may lead to an early conclusion that Turkey will achieve regional hegemony. However, the reality is completely different, and this is where the concept of tragedy stems from. Potential asymmetrical threats such as ISIL and the diachronic problem of Kurdish rebels at the southeastern boundary of Turkey represent new dilemmas in its upgrade to the status of a global power and regional hegemon. The Kurdish problem is still an “open wound,” raising the question of how to remedy inadequate internal cohesion before engaging in power maximization in the international front.

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However, the most important problems for the Turkish grand strategy are related to the issue of external balancing, i.e., alliances. An alliance is “a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states” characterized by a convergence of interests and a common threat perception.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, what should not be neglected is that “since alliance treaties are unenforceable, an alliance will be viable only to the extent that it reflects the interests of its members.”<sup>19</sup> In this sense, Turkey has to keep or establish necessary alliances in the light

of the changing threat perceptions in the Middle East, the Caucasus, North Africa, and the Balkans.

In case such alliances are questionable and the above-mentioned remarks are confirmed, external balancing tends to be doubted. First, the prospect of Turkey’s access to the EU remains distant, regardless of who is responsible for this distance. Second, Turkey’s patron-client relationship with the US has become more problematic mainly due to Ankara’s changing partnership with Israel and conflicting interests in Iraq. Third, in this respect, the loss of amicable relations with Israel

<sup>18</sup> Walt (1987), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Glenn Snyder, *Alliance politics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 9.

has been identified with a limitation of Turkish influence in Washington, as well as Ankara's access to high technology and know-how concerning its military forces and intelligence-sharing. Fourth, the rapprochement with Russia seems difficult in transitioning from economic, energy, and trade relations, to those involving politics and strategy. The opposing stances of the two countries on the Syrian civil war are indicative that a spill-over from low to high politics is extremely difficult. Besides, there are even higher stakes with regard to Crimean Tatars or the ongoing Caucasian conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>20</sup> Fifth, a possible nuclear Iran could distort a potential partnership into an "asymmetrical dependence" or, to put it bluntly, a strategy of bandwagoning under the prospect of unavailability of other allies.<sup>21</sup> Further, Tehran's support to Shiite movements in the greater Middle East and Syria constitute an additional barrier.

### *Conclusion*

Before declaring something like a strategic "autonomy" or "independence," Turkey should act on some common interests with strong poles of the international system. For now, Ankara seems to have been led into a strategic stalemate, since it sees this "strategic autonomy" as a means for achieving power maximization, not vice-versa. This entails an untimely projection of will and intention as far as the already-existing internal balancing – e.g., military forces, economy, industry, agriculture, strategic planning – has to be met by external resources. According to neorealists, it is all about capabilities and not intentions. Specifically, the deterioration of its relations with major global powers capable of projecting power in the greater Middle East, and the rise of new threats, suggest that Turkey is facing major dangers without adequate capabilities. In other words, Turkey confronts a dangerous synthesis of an unstable regional environment and a limitation of the great powers' interest in the Middle East. This is mainly due to their shift in focus to the Pacific in light of rising Chinese power.

It is up to Turkish leaders and consequently state bureaucracies to learn from history and past mistakes. Turkey is found confronting a situation of broad relative capabilities, as did Napoleonic France, Imperial Japan, Germany during the two World Wars and Otto von Bismarck's reign, and the US of the 19th century. The last two examples have proved that tragedy is not inescapable and power needs to be managed on the base of benefit maximization and cost minimization.

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20 See: Filiz Tutku Aydın, "Crimean Tatars and Russia's annexation of Crimea," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2014), pp. 81-92.

21 Walt (1987), pp. 43-4.